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# **ASSESSING FOR BRUISES ON THE SOUL:**

An exploration of child protection social work with intra-familial emotional abuse

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Gemma North

Thesis submitted for the Doctor of Philosophy in Social Work

University of Sussex

May 2016

**DECLARATION**

The thesis, whether in the same or different form, has not been previously submitted to this or any other University for a degree.

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Gemma North

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UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

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### **ASSESSING FOR BRUISES ON THE SOUL:**

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#### **SUMMARY**

Previous research has revealed that social workers struggle with recognising, naming and intervening in cases of emotional abuse (Iwaniec et al. 2007). A possible reason for this is that the impact on children of emotional abuse is experienced and played out predominantly within the psychosocial rather than the physical domain. With the effects being less observable, they are more challenging to attribute directly to emotionally abusive behaviours by parents and caregivers (Glaser and Prior 1997). Not enough is yet understood about the challenges that working with emotional abuse in families present to child protection social workers in England.

This Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded PhD project seeks to advance knowledge of this topic by exploring some of the emotional and cognitive processes social workers follow when working in situations with children and families where emotional abuse is a concern. A key focus of the research is social workers' subjectivity and the ways in which this influences their practice. Aspects of practice including reflexivity, intuition and emotional self-efficacy are explored, alongside the use of law and policy and more formal assessment tools. The supportive measures social workers use to process and contain the complex feelings they experience in their daily work are investigated in relation to the decisions they make.

The research is small-scale and qualitative in nature. The data have been gathered from a sample of child protection social workers from two local authorities in the South East of England. Two focus groups were conducted, designed to generate broad themes to be further explored in individual interviews. Eight social workers were interviewed individually twice, with their follow-up interview held approximately two months after the first to give the interviewee an opportunity to reflect on the subject matter. The semi-structured interview schedule included exploration of how factors such as previous practice experiences, educational training and cultural background contribute to participants' decision-making processes during assessment and intervention with cases of emotional abuse.

Underpinned by a psychosocial approach, the analysis looks 'under the surface' of participants' responses to consider what may be subjective or unconscious in their narratives, and what might be hidden or denied. This enabled a deeper exploration of the nuances of practice with emotional abuse, allowing the individual social workers to emerge as three-dimensional human beings with vulnerabilities and strengths.

The research findings indicate that individual social workers approach identifying, assessing and intervening with children and families where emotional abuse is a concern in different ways. The social workers interviewed had clear individual strengths as a consequence of their particular approach, but struggled with reconciling their weaknesses if the impact of their day-to-day experiences of the work was not managed effectively. Defended responses to their own emotional reactions resulted in anxiety, lack of self-efficacy and splitting. Supportive mechanisms identified in the data as important to improving work with emotional abuse are containing supervisory relationships, sustained peer support and a secure workplace environment that promotes a feeling of connectedness to the wider team. The aim of the research is to contribute guidance to support social workers in their work with children and families where emotional abuse is, or may be present.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>CHAPTER 1: THE FOCUS OF THE RESEARCH.....</b>	<b>9</b>
INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE.....	9
<i>Why me</i> .....	10
<i>Why now</i> .....	12
<i>Structure of thesis</i> .....	15
WHAT IS EMOTIONAL ABUSE? AN OVERVIEW .....	16
<i>Prevalence of emotional abuse</i> .....	18
<i>The historical context of emotional abuse</i> .....	21
LAW AND POLICY IN RELATION TO EMOTIONAL ABUSE .....	23
PRACTISING SOCIAL WORK WITH EMOTIONAL ABUSE.....	29
<i>Use of evidence informed practice to support assessment</i> .....	30
<i>The emotionally skilled practitioner</i> .....	32
SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE THROUGH A PSYCHOSOCIAL LENS .....	36
CHAPTER CONCLUSION.....	41
<b>CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>43</b>
INTRODUCTION: WHAT THIS LITERATURE REVIEW IS, AND IS NOT .....	43
PARAMETERS AND METHODS OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW.....	44
HOW DO SOCIAL WORKERS DEFINE AND RECOGNISE EMOTIONAL ABUSE? .....	46
<i>Some problems with agreeing on what constitutes emotional abuse</i> .....	46
<i>Key concepts in recognising acceptable emotional care</i> .....	48
PRACTICE TOOLS FOR IDENTIFYING AND WORKING WITH EMOTIONAL ABUSE.....	67
Interventions.....	70
THE ROLE ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE PLAYS IN WORK WITH EMOTIONAL ABUSE.....	76
CHAPTER CONCLUSION.....	80
<b>CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>83</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	83
RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	83
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.....	86
PSYCHOSOCIAL METHODS.....	88
<i>'Defended' participants and researcher</i> .....	90
RESEARCHER POSITIONING .....	93
RESEARCH METHODS .....	97
<i>Focus groups</i> .....	101
<i>Individual interviews</i> .....	103
DATA ANALYSIS.....	107
<i>Gaining ethical approval and proceeding ethically</i> .....	110
<i>Anonymity and confidentiality</i> .....	113
ETHICAL CONCERNS .....	116
CHAPTER CONCLUSION.....	120
<b>CHAPTER 4: THE ROLE AND IMPACT OF 'SUBJECTIVITY' ON PRACTICE .....</b>	<b>122</b>

INTRODUCTION .....	122
PERSONAL MOTIVATION AND ITS CONSEQUENT IMPACT ON PRACTICE .....	123
'Bryony' .....	124
'Li' .....	125
'Leon' .....	126
RELATIONSHIP BASED PRACTICE. EXPLORING EMPATHY AND REFLEXIVITY:	
'FIONA' .....	128
'Second level' panel analysis of Fiona's practice .....	139
Splitting from the 'bad' system .....	142
USE OF EVIDENCE BASED PRACTICE: 'TOM' .....	144
An alternative more 'logical' approach to reflective practice .....	148
WORKING WITH 'THE SYSTEM' .....	150
What is left unsaid: 'Sean' .....	150
The working environment .....	155
RELATIONSHIP-BASED SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE .....	157
THE INTERVIEW SPACE AS AN EXPLORATION OF SOCIAL WORKER	
SUBJECTIVITY .....	162
CHAPTER CONCLUSION .....	163
<b>CHAPTER 5: IDENTIFYING AND EVIDENCING EMOTIONAL ABUSE.....</b>	<b>164</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	164
IDENTIFYING AND DESCRIBING EMOTIONAL ABUSE .....	164
EXPLORING SUBJECTIVITY IN PRACTICE: 'LI' .....	166
CULTURAL DIFFERENCE .....	169
Panel analysis .....	171
TRIAL BY MEDIA .....	173
ENCOUNTERS OF A STUDENT SOCIAL WORKER: 'SKY' .....	176
Self-efficacy and professional confidence .....	181
INTERVENTIONS .....	182
WORKING WITH THE LAW .....	183
INTEGRATING MORE 'LOGICAL' WAYS OF WORKING .....	188
CHAPTER CONCLUSION .....	190
<b>CHAPTER 6: SUPPORT SYSTEMS .....</b>	<b>192</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	192
TOM'S EXPERIENCES OF SUPERVISION AND GROUP SUPPORT .....	193
WORKING AS A TEAM .....	205
Environment and perceptions .....	210
EXTERNALLY FACILITATED SUPPORT GROUPS .....	215
CHAPTER CONCLUSION .....	218
<b>CHAPTER 7: WHAT CAN DEPTH EXPLORATIONS OF SOCIAL WORKERS'</b>	
<b>SUBJECTIVE RESPONSES TO WORK WITH EMOTIONAL ABUSE OFFER</b>	
<b>FUTURE PRACTICE? .....</b>	<b>221</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	221
CHANGING CONTEXT .....	221
BEING A SOCIAL WORKER .....	222
THE PIVOTAL ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKER SUBJECTIVITY .....	223
THE ROLE AND PLACE OF EMOTION IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE .....	225



BELONGING AND CONTAINMENT .....	226
<i>One-to-one supervision and reflective practice</i> .....	226
<i>Peer support and organisational culture</i> .....	228
COMBINING WAYS OF WORKING .....	230
CHAPTER CONCLUSION .....	231
<b>CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>232</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	232
FINDINGS .....	232
AREAS FOR FUTURE TRAINING, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH .....	234
REFLECTIONS ON THE METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH .....	239
<i>The effectiveness of the research methods</i> .....	241
THE VALUE OF CARRYING OUT RESEARCH IN THE WORKPLACE .....	242
ETHICAL AND DEFENSIBLE? .....	243
IN CONCLUSION .....	245
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>246</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b> .....	<b>265</b>
APPENDIX 1: PAGE 1 OF LITERATURE REVIEW SEARCH TERMS LOG .....	265
APPENDIX 2: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET .....	266
APPENDIX 3: CONSENT FORM FOR PROJECT PARTICIPANTS – FOCUS GROUP .....	269
APPENDIX 4: CONSENT FORM FOR PROJECT PARTICIPANTS INTERVIEWS .....	272
APPENDIX 5: CASE STUDY FOR FOCUS GROUPS .....	274
APPENDIX 6: TOPIC GUIDE .....	275
 <b>TABLE 1: CHILD PROTECTION REGISTRATION INFORMATION (DFE 2002 AND 2013)</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>TABLE 2: ATTACHMENT STYLES. ADAPTED FROM GOMEZ (1997: 160)</b> .....	<b>52</b>
<b>TABLE 3: BARLOW AND SCHRADER-MACMILLAN'S (2010) CONDENSED VERSION OF         THE BRASSARD AND DONOVAN (2006) DEFINING PSYCHOLOGICAL         MALTREATMENT FRAMEWORK</b> .....	<b>58</b>
<b>TABLE 4: PROFILES OF PARTICIPANTS (LISTED ALPHABETICALLY)</b> .....	<b>106</b>
 <b>FIGURE 1: THE 'FRAMEWORK FOR THE ASSESSMENT OF CHILDREN IN NEED         AND THEIR FAMILIES' (DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH/DEPARTMENT OF         EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT/HOME OFFICE, 2000)</b> .....	<b>68</b>
<b>FIGURE 2: ADAPTED FROM GLASER ET AL (2012) 4-TIER FRAMEA MODEL</b> .....	<b>69</b>
<b>FIGURE 3: RESEARCH PROCESS</b> .....	<b>98</b>

## CHAPTER 1: THE FOCUS OF THE RESEARCH

### INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

This research addresses some of the key challenges that work with intra-familial emotional abuse present for child protection social work in England today. The term 'emotional abuse' is a contested one, and concerns in relation to this will be addressed in this thesis. During the course of carrying out this research the law has changed and psychological harm towards a child is now a criminal concern. For the purposes of providing consistency, in a context where descriptions are not yet uniformly agreed on, the term 'psychological harm' is regarded to be a central component of the broader category of emotional abuse.

With this in mind, the research is carried out against the backdrop of growing public interest into what it is exactly that emotional abuse constitutes, and how such harm is evidenced by professionals. It acknowledges the ambivalence English society holds in relation to harm that is not easily seen. Emotional abuse often co-exists with other forms of abuse, so there are inevitable overlaps and interludes where other aspects of child abuse are considered. This close-up examination of the specific and nuanced area of child protection social work with emotional abuse allows for some light to be shone on a contested area where practice can be opaque and mercurial. Much of the ground covered in this thesis can be applied to broader social work settings. An adults' social worker, for example, could relate to many aspects of the practice experiences of the family and children's social workers.

There are a number of elements that go into the process of work with children and families where emotional abuse is a concern, and the tasks of the social worker allocated to a case may vary according to what stage of the child protection process they are involved at. The process involves the key components of identification, assessment, evidencing, intervention and review. In the case of emotional abuse it is necessary for a social worker to first identify if they consider emotional abuse to be present and harmful in a parent-child relationship. This means they must have a clear idea of what constitutes emotional abuse. They need to assess what the presenting concerns are, and the extent to which the child is

suffering. The social worker also needs to predict the potential impairments the existing harm may cause in the long term: if the child is likely to have poorer outcomes later in life because of the parenting they are currently experiencing. Once the social worker has decided the situation is risky for the child they need provide evidence of its harm, or potential harm. As set out in *Working Together 2015* (WT15) they are required to take the lead on an intervention, along with professional group members, including the child's GP and teacher and health visitor, in order to decide upon the most appropriate action to take to safeguard the child's welfare.

These are not clearly defined tasks; as a social worker proceeds and gathers more information they may have cause to re-evaluate their initial thoughts and decisions. It is therefore necessary to regularly reflect on the progress made and revise elements of the whole identification, assessment, evidencing, intervention and review process. Work with emotional abuse importantly encompasses the social worker's use of their self in the job. This is particularly challenging to demonstrate in work with emotional abuse, as it is an additional aspect of work that is not always easy to make visible. The key aim of this thesis is to exemplify experiences of work with emotional abuse through discussions with social workers about their work.

### *Why me*

Before I began a career in social care work I had simplistic notions about parents who were 'child abusers' which were based on news stories in the media. I thought they were disturbed people who did unspeakable things to their own children. Over time working with groups such as service users with alcohol and substance misuse issues, I gradually developed a more sophisticated understanding about the notion of 'abuse'. I empathised with service users who had problems in their personal histories who, I then found out, were also parents. Some had children who had been removed from their care. Many of the service users I encountered had been in care themselves or experienced abuse in their childhoods. They spoke with anger and pain about trying to get their children back from cold-hearted and unreasonable social workers who had snatched them away.

I worked with young people and children, deemed to be 'at risk' of poor outcomes, in youth centres, schools and hostels. I was not always aware of what the presenting problems were. Beyond the collection of volatile presenting behaviours and habits, and a familiar smell of unwashed clothes and bodies, I wondered what it was about them that separated these children and young people from others. Some seemed to embody a sense of being emotionally lost: trapped in a repetitive search for some kind of resolution to an indefinable absence in their lives. Sometimes they presented as mistrusting and fearful of disclosing their pain, in case showing it caused them more trouble. Or they might be over-excited and chaotic. I noticed a distant, guarded look in some of the eyes of the children and young people I spoke to. Sometimes they seemed hopeful, relieved that they were being listened to. At other times there was a sense of helplessness and despair in the way they talked to me, and they seemed resigned to being let down.

During my training as a social worker, I learned skills including drawing genograms of family histories and I formed an understanding of attachment theory. My work placements introduced me to parents who were often people who were struggling to bring up their children and were not getting it right. The children I encountered rarely identified themselves as 'abused'. They were often confused, loyal to their families and anxious not be rejected by anyone. After I qualified as a social worker, I went to work in a child protection team. I thought that I understood the various signs of neglect, physical abuse and sexual abuse. The signs of emotional abuse, both in connection with other forms of abuse, and as a standalone category, I was less certain about. I was even less sure of how to explain the reasons for it being able to label it significantly harmful. The cases where it seemed to me that emotional abuse was the main concern presented me with the most challenges in terms of articulating and demonstrating the impact of the harm.

As a social worker I did not find the labelling process of calling a case physical, sexual, emotional abuse or neglect helpful. I understood it was necessary to bring focus to the nature of the abuse, but the need to call it one thing or another seemed restrictive and compartmentalising. Parents seemed to hang woefully onto the judgment at the end of an initial case conference, searching for meaning in the category that had been allocated to their behaviour. I grappled with the uncomfortable feelings of 'monitoring' a case to find different reasons for getting

support for a family. This left me with a collection of unresolved emotions. Although it seemed reasonable, given the context of the law and policy requirements, it also seemed dishonest. This dishonesty went so far as to feel like denial of the already present emotional abuse, thereby adding more harm to an already abusive system.

Holding a growing caseload of children regarded at risk of significant harm, I felt like a bystander as cases where the abuse seemed too ambiguous and complex to definitively label as emotionally abusive slipped down my list of priorities. The act of 'holding' cases became a burden I quickly took for granted. I 'held' on to them but could do little more than visit and offer parenting support, unless they were redefined once they reached boiling point, often as physical abuse. Unable to offer satisfactory help, I felt I faded into the background of a child's life. On a personal level I had to get used to being considered by families to be just another interfering social worker, wheedling out information from each of them, but from their perspective not really 'getting it' or finding an adequate resolution.

Although on a practical level I received good feedback, I felt dissatisfied at my inability to prove what I felt was patently harmful, that is, the presence of emotional abuse. I searched for answers in journals and amongst my colleagues and supervisors for better ways of working with these cases. I rationalised that this was a normal feeling for a newly qualified social worker. I tried to adopt the hardy persona of more experienced workers with impressive stamina whilst I clung on to messages I received at university about using my own reflexivity in hard-to-define cases. Opening myself up to the painful experiences of others, whilst finding the time to recover in order to do it again and again seemed like an insurmountable task. It was a general sense of dissatisfaction in my practice that motivated my interest to seeking out the space to interrogate how work with emotional abuse can be carried out in a way that is effective.

### *Why now*

Emotional abuse is a notion that remains contested in social work literature and in everyday life. Professionals struggle, not only to recognise and operationally define it, but also 'experience uncertainty about proving it legally' (Glaser 2002: 697). The available literature in relation to emotional abuse and wider social work practice

already accepts there are difficulties in relation to definitions, legal thresholds and resource constraints (e.g. Garbarino 2011; Glaser 2002; Trickett 2011; Turnbull 2010b). When providing effective interventions for children at risk of emotional harm there are additional complications, such as defining exactly what works (Barlow and Schrader McMillan 2010).

The government document *Child Protection: Messages from Research* (DoH 1995) concluded that 'long-term difficulties seldom follow from a single abusive event' (53). A refocusing of social work practice emerged from this report, with the government's introduction of the *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (DoH 2000). This required social workers to consider the wider environment of children and their families, and placed less emphasis upon risk and investigation during their assessments. The need to embrace a more 'holistic approach' (Hawkes 2005) to family functioning was promoted. This redefining of practice recognised that the quality of intra-familial relationships must be explored, and the less tangible aspects of abuse that underlie problematic family dynamics should be investigated in order to support effective interventions. The guidance of this framework sharpened social work focus on interrogating the causes and effects of dysfunctional intra-familial relationships.

In a social work community in England that has accepted that a single abusive event is rarely the reason for a person's long-term difficulties (DoH 1995; Hawkes 2005), there is still much to learn about the impact of emotional harm on children. On the one hand notions of bullying or domestic violence are condemned, but there is much uncertainty about where to draw the line in terms of parental behaviours towards their children and when to intervene. Much ambivalence exists in association with what exactly emotional abuse constitutes and on what terms it is accepted as harmful. Parents themselves are often uncertain whether they are crossing an invisible line and being emotionally abusive, particularly when they may be behaving towards their child in a similar style to the way they were parented.

Child protection professionals may recall their own childhoods, and think about their own parenting experiences whilst they try to decide if a situation is emotionally harmful and what the evidence of emotional harm is. Social work interventions with emotional abuse cases give rise to familiar debates about the role of professional authority, in particular care versus the control of the state. For example, to what

extent do people have the right to the privacy in how they choose to parent their children (e.g. Parton and Martin 1989)?

It is involving and challenging to work with emotional abuse in part because the social worker doing the job of detecting emotional abuse and intervening with it will also be reacting to the situation on a personal level. They may wonder if they are 'doing the right thing' by addressing a situation that is unclear in its harmful effects. By highlighting nebulous issues whilst lacking clear directives, the social worker may be concerned that stress may be heightened in the family unit, and the immediate impact on the child may be detrimental.

A key purpose of the research is to disentangle some of the less distinct reasons that make work with emotional abuse a particularly complex and challenging aspect of the statutory child protection process. This research uses the considerations outlined in this section as a starting point for engagement with the relevant and available literature. This, in turn, will provide the background for a deeper empirical exploration of some of the thoughts and feelings about the work that social workers have about their work with emotional abuse. The overall reason for this is to illuminate the complexity of the work and make a contribution to understanding what is needed, both by the individual social worker and the wider social work community, in order to address the harm caused by emotional abuse.

During the course of carrying out this research, I have interviewed some child protection social workers who have had similar experiences to mine, and others who have very different perspectives and working styles. In this thesis I try to explore and learn from all of the participants, with the aim of focusing on their individual experiences and feelings about work with emotional abuse. I cannot claim scientific objectivity about my approach, as I have used my own experiences of the work as a starting point. I have taken the opportunity to share the experiences of the participants, and my interpretations of them. This self-aware aspect of the study is a strength of using a psychosocial research approach. Acknowledging one's subjectivity opens up the potential for vulnerability, as it brings focus to personal foibles. However, when faultfinding is put to one side, defences can be lowered, and a greater degree of honesty may emerge. From this, greater clarity about the difficulties of practice with abuse can begin to develop. Through this research, I aim to make a contribution to a deeper understanding of

the child protection social work role, and of how emotional abuse is tackled in a statutory context. This will be done by exploring aspects of practice that are often not touched upon as they remain un-interrogated, beneath every day experiences.

### *Structure of thesis*

In the remainder of this chapter, key background information about emotional abuse is covered. The next section starts with what emotional abuse is, moves through its context in relation to the history of social work, and ends with the prevalent approaches social workers currently take to working with it.

*Chapter Two Literature Review:* In the next chapter relevant literature about child protection work with emotional abuse is reviewed. It clearly locates the research findings in the context of current knowledge about the subject.

*Chapter Three Methodology:* In the first section of the methodology chapter the overarching research question and the four research sub-questions are outlined. The methodology chapter goes on to describe how a critical realist framework and use of psychosocial methods support an interrogation of the research questions. The practical steps taken during this small-scale qualitative research project are outlined, with particular attention to ethical concerns, and researcher positioning.

*Chapter Four The Role and Impact of 'Subjectivity' on Practice:* The first analysis chapter focuses on the aspect of the 'individual agency' of the social worker, exploring domains such as their personal motivations for doing the work and how they use their reflexivity. There is discussion of the use of additional data gathered in the form of analysis panels, which were used to 'trouble' my own perceptions of the interviews.

*Chapter Five Identifying and Evidencing Emotional Abuse:* The second analysis chapter deconstructs the identification and evidencing processes of work with emotional abuse. For example, on the surface these are pragmatic tasks, but at a deeper level they are saturated with social meaning and anxieties. The chapter looks at levels of professional self-efficacy in relation to social worker abilities when working with law and policy. Depth explanations located in subjective experiences are considered.



*Chapter Six Support Systems:* The third analysis chapter looks at the supportive measures social workers use to process and manage the complex feelings they experience in their daily work. In this chapter the key mechanisms of one-to-one supervision, peer support and the impact of the workplace environment are explored. The importance of providing effective reflective spaces for processing complex information about emotional abuse, and the impact of the work on social workers are discussed.

*Chapter Seven Answering the Research Sub-questions:* This penultimate chapter draws together the outcomes from the research, answering the questions posed in the methodology chapter.

*Chapter Eight Conclusion:* The concluding chapter considers the overall messages from the research and makes recommendations for practice and further research. It is also an opportunity to reflect on the effectiveness of the research process.

## WHAT IS EMOTIONAL ABUSE? AN OVERVIEW

This section aims to briefly introduce emotional abuse, its prevalence and historical context. It highlights the relevant law and policy that supports work with it, and the difficulties social workers associate with evidencing emotional abuse. The section introduces two key elements to social worker practice: that which is evidence-based and relational. The literature review in chapter two goes on to explore the components of emotional abuse, and the various ways of work with it, in greater detail.

In its most common and pervasive form, emotional abuse occurs in a family relationship between a parent and a child and this is the context of this research. The definition of emotional abuse in official guidance *Working Together 2015* locates evidence of emotional abuse in the behaviour or presentation of parents or children. The very nature of parental emotional abuse makes it difficult to define; it is closer to normative parental behaviour than other kinds of abuse (Brown and Ward 2012), which present questions about when 'good enough' parenting crosses a threshold to become harmful. The thresholds for parental behaviour becoming harmful are difficult to define as many of the behaviours that constitute emotional

abuse may occur in normal family life and not be necessarily harmful to a child (Iwaniec 1995).

Emotional abuse can co-exist with physical and sexual abuse and neglect. Cases of emotional abuse and neglect often have similar characteristics (Trickett et al 2011). It can also exist as a standalone form of maltreatment. Emotional abuse includes both acts of omission and commission. Omissions might be neglectful behaviours such as an absence of emotional warmth, and commissions describe actively harmful behaviours such as verbal abuse. This makes it complex for social workers and other professionals to identify and work effectively with. Consequently it is under-recognised and under-reported.

Emotional abuse is often evident in the quality of relationship between a primary caregiver and a child. The perpetrator is almost always the primary caregiver, and therefore 'fused' into one person (Glaser and Prior 1997: 323). When the abuser and carer are the same person a child's basic 'need for safety, love, belonging and self-esteem' (Barlow and Schrader MacMillan 2010) is directly negated. Rather than having clear beginnings and endings to abusive activity it is constituted either by discrete and re-occurring incidents such as verbal aggression or by 'descriptors of a relationship' (Glaser and Prior 1997: 323) which can involve parental rejection or unavailability.

Parents may not intend to cause this harm to their children, and they may in fact think they are doing it in the child's best interest. Their behaviour may be inconsiderate and ill-advised rather than intentionally harmful (Glaser 1993). Abuse may occur in neglectful behaviour, such as being emotionally and physically unavailable, unresponsive and inattentive. It can occur through more active kinds of behaviours such as over protecting a child so they are not able to socialise and learn, behaving with hostility towards them, denigrating and rejecting them, blaming them for things they are too young to understand or singling them out for different treatment than their siblings (Barlow and Schrader-MacMillan 2010). The literature and social work policy, which sets out the signs and symptoms of parental emotionally abusive behaviour, are explored in the next chapter.

Emotional abuse that occurs during childhood is associated with difficulties later in life. In the long term, children who have been emotionally abused are at greater risk

of mental health problems and developing other associated issues including substance misuse and entering abusive partner relationships than other forms of abuse (Daniel, Taylor and Scott 2011; Chiricella-Besemer and Motta 2008; Sable 1999). However, adults who were abused as children do not automatically continue the cycle of abuse (Sneddon et al. 2009). Factors such as individual resilience may protect or reduce the harmful effects of emotional abuse (Garbarino 2011).

Other factors to be taken into consideration include the cumulative effect of abuse if it has occurred over a long period of time. Issues such as parental mental health and substance misuse influence increase the risks of emotional abuse, as may environmental factors such as financial problems and lack of educational opportunities (Forrester and Harwin 2006; Chamberland et al. 2012). Positive factors in the child's life must also be taken into account as they contribute to a child's resilience. These include friends, other family members and teachers who may be able to support them (Hart et al. 2007).

### *Prevalence of emotional abuse*

Emotional abuse can happen in all kinds of relationships, and it is considered to be one of the most harmful forms of child abuse and neglect (Barlow and Schrader McMillan 2010). During 2001/ 2002 emotional abuse accounted for 17% of Child Protection registrations. This rose to 31.7% in 2013 (DfE 2002, 2013). However, it is likely that there is a much higher prevalence as many cases go unidentified. It is a form of abuse that is less likely to be reported by professionals. This is in part because professionals struggle with recognising, naming and intervening in cases of emotional abuse (Iwaniec et al., 2007). It is also because the signs of emotional abuse are not always visible. Statistics about child abuse in general do not accurately represent numbers of children who actually experience abuse. It is usually hidden from view and those concerned may be too young, too scared, ashamed or unaware that what they are experiencing is abuse, to tell anyone about what is happening to them (NSPCC July 2011).

The first comprehensive UK maltreatment study was undertaken by The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and involved a large random probability sample of the general population, covering abuse both inside

and outside of the family. Results were reported by Cawson et al. (2000), and May-Chahal and Cawson (2005) (cited in Sneddon, Iwaniec, and Stewart 2009: 43), indicating the nationally high proportions of cases designated as emotionally abusive in child protection planning.

Finding accurate statistics on any of the areas of abuse in combination or in isolation is difficult (Sneddon et al. 2009). Since the inclusion of emotional abuse on child protection registers in 1980, the reported numbers of children in the UK and other developed countries suffering 'emotional abuse' has gradually increased. National information about child protection registrations (see table 4) indicates that in spite of the complexity of working with emotional abuse cases, child protection registrations based on this category are rising. A much higher prevalence is likely than is indicated here with 8-9% of women and about 4% of men in UK and US self-reporting experiences of severe emotional abuse during childhood (Gilbert et al. 2009 cited in Barlow and Schrader-Mcmillan 2010). In addition to this, statistics can only tell us about cases that social workers encounter.

Ascribing potential emotional harm to children according to defining characteristics such as gender, age or ethnicity is a complex and imprecise activity. These areas are under researched, and studies with varying purposes will point to different reasons that may create greater risk of harm for a child (Chamberland et al. 2012). The literature is inconclusive about gender as an influencing factor and there does not appear to be one gender of child who is more vulnerable to emotional abuse. Generally 'both boys and girls are equally vulnerable to experiencing psychological maltreatment' (Iwaniec et al. 2006: 75). However, more girls report instances of it than boys, and Turnbull's (2010b) study about professional reporting of emotional abuse, indicated that out of 108 children, more females (55.6%) compared to males (44.4%), were at risk of maltreatment. The average age of children in the study of those identified as at risk was 5.86 years.

Figures of emotional abuse registrations rose significantly to 31.7% in 2013 (DfE 2002, 2013). This contrasts with registrations for sexual abuse registrations, which dropped over that period from 10% to 4.8% and physical abuse registrations, which fell from 19% to 11.7%. Figures for neglect, by comparison, have risen only slightly from 39% to 41.0%. Many cases, particularly emotional abuse cases and neglect cases very often have characteristics that overlap (Trickett et al 2011). Such

instances are described by the statistics as ‘multiple’ categories, referring to when a child has been defined as experiencing one or more categories of abuse.

**Table 1:** Child protection registration information (DfE 2002 and 2013)

	<b>Neglect</b>	<b>Physical Abuse</b>	<b>Sexual Abuse</b>	<b>Emotional Abuse</b>	<b>Multiple Categories</b>
<b>2001/2002</b>	39.0	19.0	10.0	17.0	15.0
<b>2013</b>	41.0	11.7	4.8	31.7	10.8

It is not possible to be sure from the statistics available if instances of emotional abuse are increasing, or if abuse is increasingly being defined as emotional. Rates of children registered on child protection plans are increasing owing largely to increased knowledge about abuse. However, the figures could indicate that numbers of children being abused, and specifically those being emotionally abused, are rising (Munro 2008). Increasing instances of emotional abuse could be a consequence of societal ‘prohibitions on physical and sexual abuse’ (Davis 1996), whereby parents who previously used physical coercion have substituted this with threats of punishment and use of demeaning language as an alternative measures. Or it could be the case that heightened awareness of developmental delays in children (Iwaniec 1996), and evidence of increased mental health issues in later life caused by emotional abuse (Turnbull 2010b) have led to rising reports of emotional abuse. Social worker awareness of these correlations may be resulting in greater professional certainty when labelling a case as emotionally abusive. Emotional abuse remains a hazy concept that is in part defined by a lack of professional uncertainty about what constitutes it (Garbarino 2011; Trickett et al. 2011). Lack of clarity around interpretation of statistics indicates that further interrogation into how and why cases come to be recognised as emotional abuse is required.

### *The historical context of emotional abuse*

'Emotional abuse' became a category of child maltreatment for inclusion on child protection registers in 1980 (Cawson 2000; Evans 2002; Iwaniec 1997). According to English law, children may experience one or more categories of abuse. These categories are designated under the Children Act 1989 as physical, sexual, emotional and neglect. Before this time, emotional abuse was not acknowledged by law, the focus being mainly on physical abuse and physical neglect. There has been a gradual recognition of the impact of sexual abuse on children, although it was not until the 2003 Sexual Offences Act that protection of children against sexual abuse was placed at the centre of legislation. Emotional abuse has less of a profile in the public awareness than other forms of abuse, as it is not considered so serious a 'social taboo' (Spinazzola et al. 2014).

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, laws protecting children's welfare focused upon physical neglect and harm. Maltreatment was regarded as that which could be seen, characterised by poverty or religious ideas of good and evil. Social work was less concerned with understanding behaviour, rather with what people did (Parton 2009). In the early part of the twentieth century, a combination of an interest in the psychological functioning of human beings and a commitment to social change characterised a newly emerging 'modernity.' An 'upsurge of concern' (Smart 2000: 56) in the public consciousness about sexual abuse in the late 1970s contributed a transition from a 'simple' to a more 'reflexive modernity' (Ferguson 2004: 21). People wanted to deeply understand, and if necessary interrogate, that which had previously seemed on the surface to be uncomplicated and gone unchallenged (Howe 1996).

The NSPCC was formed in 1884, to address the harsh conditions of 'social deprivation and brutal attitudes' (NSPCC 2000: 1) that many Victorian children endured. NSPCC officers were men, they wore uniforms and the organisation 'particularly liked to recruit men who had served in the armed forces' (Ferguson 2010: 22). The Children's Charter was passed by Parliament in 1889, which for the first time enabled British law to intervene where parents were found to be ill-treating a child. A formalised welfare system that focuses on caring for vulnerable members of society existed in England from around 1900-1914 (Ferguson 2004: 17), led by social reformers including William Beveridge who heralded state interventions into

what were previously regarded as private, family matters. A gradually changing social climate and transformations in governmental strategies in UK and USA marked a sense of public responsibility to support citizens 'from the cradle to the grave'. It is arguable at this point that organised professional structures to meet the social care needs of society began to emerge into what we today recognise as statutory social work practice. The 1933 Children and Young Persons Act acknowledged that younger more vulnerable members of society required protection, and in 1962 US paediatricians Kempe and Steele used the term 'Battered-Child Syndrome' to describe 'a clinical condition in young children who have received serious physical abuse'. This conceivably marked out a more specific role for professional social work interventions into the lives of families and children.

The death of Maria Colwell in 1973 prompted the advent of public inquiries into child protection cases. The expectation of 'a public narrative around child abuse' (Butler and Drakeford 2011: 197) was fuelled by the media and has in part shaped the way in which the social work profession responds to concerns about the most vulnerable members of society. It has been in the last twenty-five years that the contemporary politics of child protection has become increasingly emotionally charged and publicised with a dominant narrative of blame and failure, leading to a more forensic orientation in policy regarding child protection work.

Emotional child abuse is a more recently studied phenomenon in the domain of social work, but has been explored in both psychoanalysis and developmental psychology in the past (Klosinski 1993). For example, Spitz (1945) studied the poor developmental outcomes of infants who were given physical and medical care, but no emotional care. Bowlby (1951) considered the impact of parenting style, emotional deprivation and adverse experiences on child development during the time of the Second World War (Pierson 2011). Evacuated children experiencing maternal deprivation and loss were observed for the impact on their attachment patterns and resulting behaviours.

However, despite this interest in the emotional needs of children for their healthy development, the conceptualisation of emotional abuse as a concern for child protection professionals remained on the sidelines until the 1980s, meriting 'barely a mention' in contemporary discourse (Doyle 1996: 565). It is believed that a

continued lack of interest in and focus on child emotional abuse may have been due to the perception that it has fewer negative consequences than other forms of child maltreatment (Iwaniec 2006: 10). However, as research illuminates more about the interconnection between the biological, the social and the psychological (Wetherell 2013), the body of information about the insidious and discrete nature of emotional abuse have developed.

## LAW AND POLICY IN RELATION TO EMOTIONAL ABUSE

Social workers must deal with the law, lawyers and legal systems (Braye and Preston-Shoot 2006: 19). Although social workers recognise their practice is inherently bound up with the law, it is often seen by practitioners as 'alien and hostile territory', and has been identified as 'not social work' by social work students (Braye & Preston-Shoot 2005). While most social work students can answer questions about the law, research with carers (Barnes 2000) indicated that in practice situations, social workers were unprepared to use their legal skills. Previous research indicates that social workers are uneasy about acting as statutory agents, and become stressed when their work brings them into contact with the law (Brammer 2007: 4). How social workers use the law and policy available to support their child protection work amidst this incongruity is of particular interest in relation to work with emotional abuse where issues of how to identify, assess for, evidence, review and intervene in potentially harmful situations may create feelings of anxiety during practice. To what extent does law and policy then offer support or generate further complexity for a child protection social worker to navigate?

According to English law, children may be defined as experiencing one or more of four categories of abuse. These categories are designated under the Children Act 1989 (CA89) to be physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect. Local Authorities have a general duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children within their area who are in need (CA89 Sec.17). They must investigate when there is reasonable cause to suspect that a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer 'significant harm' (Sec. 47 CA89). Professionals such as social workers along



with family law courts decide whether a child is experiencing abuse and is at risk of further harm.

CA89 indicates that intent to cause harm is not required when establishing if it has been caused. This is essential in clarifying that even where there is no *intent* to cause harm, parental behaviour may still be detrimental to the wellbeing of the child. Emotional abuse is conceptualised quite lengthily by English law and policy. Working Together to Safeguard Children 2015 (WT15) is the statutory guidance on inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. Paragraph 1.34 in WT15 defines emotional abuse as:

*‘The persistent emotional maltreatment of a child such as to cause severe and persistent adverse effects on the child’s emotional development. It may involve conveying to children that they are worthless or unloved, inadequate, or valued only insofar as they meet the needs of another person. It may include not giving the child opportunities to express their views, deliberately silencing them or making fun of what they say or how they communicate. It may feature age or developmentally inappropriate expectations being imposed on children. These may include interactions that are beyond the child’s developmental capability, as well as overprotection and limitation of exploration and learning, or preventing the child participating in normal social interaction. It may involve seeing or hearing the ill-treatment of another. It may involve serious bullying (including cyber-bullying), causing children frequently to feel frightened or in danger, or the exploitation or corruption of children. Some level of emotional abuse is involved in all types of maltreatment of a child, though it may occur alone’* (WT15 paragraph 1.34).

This long definition, full of examples, is in contrast to the simpler and less ambiguous WT15 definition for physical abuse (paragraph 1.33);

*‘Physical abuse may involve hitting, shaking, throwing, poisoning, burning or scalding, drowning, suffocating, or otherwise causing physical harm to a child. Physical harm may also be caused when a parent or carer fabricates the symptoms of, or deliberately induces, illness in a child’* (WT15 paragraph 1.33).

The WT15 policy direction underpins child protection social work practice in England and the definition it gives therefore forms the basis for a working meaning of emotional abuse in this research.

Previous research demonstrates that social workers find it difficult to recognise, name and intervene in cases of emotional abuse (Iwaniec et al. 2007). The definition of emotional abuse in official guidance (Working Together 2015) locates

evidence of emotional abuse in the behaviour or presentation of parents or children with little clarity of where the threshold for intervention should be. Social workers thus have considerable discretion in exercising professional judgment.

### Significant harm

Judging whether a child is suffering or likely to suffer 'significant harm' has become a crucial task for social workers. They need to decide where the boundary lies in distinguishing when a case for a 'child in need', becomes a 'child at risk' (Ayre 1998: 330).

WT15 offers guidance in assessing significant harm, stating it is comprised of:

*'... a compilation of significant events, both acute and long-standing, which interrupt, change or damage the child's physical and psychological development'* (WT15 paragraph 1.28).

Social workers and courts must look at the facts of each individual case and decide where the thresholds lie (NSPCC 2012). However, defining the threshold of emotional maltreatment has been proved to be difficult and has contributed to the complications of getting the negative consequences of emotional abuse recognised (Rushton and Dance 2005: 415). CA89 states that evidence of 'significant harm', or the likelihood of it, derived from 'the care given to the child' (CA89 Sec. 31:1), or that which is not given, is the threshold justifying state intervention into family life for the best interests of children. What constitutes 'significant' is not defined by law, although it does say that the court should compare the health and development of the child 'with that which could be reasonably expected of a similar child' (CA89 Sec. 31:10).

However, at some point in most parent-child relationships, some interactions will include behaviours that could be described as emotionally abusive (Glaser and Prior 1997: 323). So, when do we decide that the harm the child is experiencing is attributable to the care they are receiving, or should have received but did not (Masson 2010)? Glaser and Prior (1997) say that the threshold of significant harm is reached when the balance between good-enough and unacceptable interaction is skewed so as 'to render the abusive aspects typical of the relationship' (323).

'Chronic' cases are characterised by a lengthy pattern of actions or incidents, none of which alone are sufficient to trigger interventions. When social workers engage closely with families over long periods of time, they can become acclimatised to this entrenched behaviour and start to overlook cumulative concerns. Unacceptably low standards of care can come to be regarded as normal (Ayre 1998). In the absence of unambiguous evidence about the nature of harm and how it has been caused, the professional system may be unsure how to proceed. Many such cases are not sufficiently 'high risk' in the scheme of child protection thresholds to do more than trigger continued offers of support and monitoring (Glaser 2002; Iwaniec 2003; Smith Slep et al. 2011). Such cases are prone to slipping below the social worker's 'radar'. They know the case is troubling but believe little more can be done. Becoming preoccupied with more immediate matters, for example obtaining a court order for children for whom abuse is more certain, becomes a priority (O'Hagan 1995; Iwaniec et al., 2007).

As the term 'significant harm' is so contested, particularly in relation to thresholds of emotional abuse, lengthy delays in bringing interventions may occur. One reason for delays may be social workers who place a heavy concentration on a family being assessed for their weaknesses rather than paying due attention to their strengths (Ayre 1998: 330). Debates about factors of resilience may ensue; the circumstances of emotional abuse may be harmful in one case, but less detrimental in another. How and why children have differing capacities to be affected by harmful interactions cannot always be fully explained (Turnbull 2010b). Factors such as a generally secure and organised attachment to a caregiver can enable a child to become more resilient to parental maltreatment (Iwaniec 1995).

In the absence of a detailed definition of significant harm it is necessary to draw on 'a very substantial array of factors relevant to assessment' (Ayre 1998: 341) in order to make judgments about whether it is present, and to ensure families are not unnecessarily drawn into child protection proceedings. Deciding what constitutes significant harm in cases of emotional abuse must be considered within the terms of its level of persistence, frequency, enormity and pervasiveness (Brown and Ward 2012). Other key domains to be identified when conceptualising a framework of emotional abuse are who the abuser is (in cases of child abuse it tends to be the

caregiver), the abuser behaviour, the intention of the behaviour, the consequences of the abuse, the child's characteristics and the child's age.

Statutory guidance such as 'Working Together' (March 2015) offer to bridge the interpretive gap between law and practice. However, the best way of providing evidence of the significance of harm in cases where social workers assess emotional abuse is open to interpretation. Often in situations where a case goes to court, a 'wait and see' approach to evidencing significant harm is required until clarification is produced (Brammer 2007: 12). The vagueness of the term 'significant harm' is particular problematic in relation to emotional abuse. The variables are such that no two cases are likely to be identical. The resources of time and money available to local authorities are limited, so there is pressure on social workers to make 'consistent and reliable judgments about where to draw lines' (Ayre 1998: 331).

Effectively supervising a relationship which is characterised by its harmful nature is challenging for social workers, and it has been argued that as a form of harm emotional abuse is not amendable with current child protection procedures which have 'connotations of immediacy' (Glaser 1997: 323). Responses to emotional abuse therefore occur during the time social workers are assessing cases, and working '*towards* protection' (Glaser 1997) is a more accurate explanation for how interventions with emotional abuse take place.

### Developments to the law

Laws tend to take far longer to change than the rate at which knowledge about social issues is amassed. The language used to describe social issues and the professional practice that addresses them evolves far more quickly than 'black letter' law does. 'Black letter law' is the 'traditional view of law' (Fox and Bell 1999: 9), which refers to formal legal rules and principles which are derived from cases and statutes. Consequently, the law may not keep pace with practice developments (Brammer 2007: 12). There have been many changes to prevalent attitudes about welfare and human rights in recent years. What is known about abuse towards children and the duties of social workers to protect them has developed considerably. There have been numerous laws and policy guidelines made to

address harmful behaviour towards children, but there are inevitable inconsistencies amongst them.

During the writing up of this thesis psychological abuse became a criminal offence (May 2015). Changes to the law made in The Serious Crime Act have amended the Children and Young Person's Act 1933 (CYPA33) to incorporate injury of a 'psychological nature'. Over the two years that the charity Action for Children campaigned for this change to the law, public debate about the implications of criminalisation of emotional abuse has grown, along with discussion about the implications for law enforcement agencies such as the police, social workers and the courts (Action for Children 2015). Amendments made by The Serious Crime Act included changing the outdated term 'mental derangement' to 'psychological suffering'. This change in terminology may still be confusing for those engaging with the law as, although it encompasses emotional abuse as described in CA89, there is no mention of the term emotional abuse. Although family law is a mechanism to support positive outcomes for children and their families, it is possible to see how discrete laws can appear to be in conflict with one another (Brammer 2007: 12) and lead to confusion.

To add to this confusion, some researchers argue that the term emotional abuse is inaccurate and does not reflect the nuances of harmful relationships we are now aware of; Glaser (2011) prefers to refer to 'emotional neglect' to reflect the omissions as well as the commissions in parental behaviour; whilst O'Hagan (1993) refers to 'emotional and psychological' abuse to indicate differences in varying developmental delays caused by early trauma. The literature social workers may access to help them work with the law may present them with the additional deliberation of how best to present their assessments in a clear and assertive fashion when there are so many inconsistencies about the concept of emotional abuse to overcome.

### How social workers engage with the law

Many social work practitioners have a number of fears when working with the law, and feel inadequately equipped to engage with it. Whilst providing social workers with powers and duties, it does not necessarily offer clear direction. This is

particularly the case in relation to emotional abuse where clarity around definitions is lacking. Ascertaining where the thresholds lie depends on a number of circumstances, including the relative severity of other cases held within a particular locality or even within a particular team. The Children Act 1989/2004 does not set boundaries for practice with emotional abuse, which often results in social workers needing to show substantial discretion on ways to practice within the limits imposed by providing 'significant harm'.

Whilst this can be an advantage to those who are confident with using the law, this can inspire fear in social workers when they feel 'up against' other professionals in the system who seem to be better equipped to use it and are representing the interests of the 'opposition' (Brammer 2007: 12). It is at times construed as something that 'creates tensions and dilemmas in practice, gets in the way of, or spoils, relationships with service users, or as a big stick with which social workers will be beaten when they go to court' (Braye and Preston-Shoot, 2006: 20). In addition to this social workers often feel overwhelmed by expectations in court to provide evidence about abuse, and they believe they are considered as having limited credence and status.

There is a public expectation that legal systems follow the principles of 'natural justice and for justice to be seen to be done' (Brammer 2007: 13). This measured approach leads to the law at times seeming like a bureaucratic machine, concerned more with processing forms accurately and following procedure than dealing with the central issues in a case. The child welfare system in England has been described in the literature as responding too slowly and indecisively in responses to evidence of abuse and neglect (Brown and Ward 2014), meaning that children are left too long in abusive situations, This has consequences not only for their immediate protection needs but also for their long term outcomes.

## PRACTISING SOCIAL WORK WITH EMOTIONAL ABUSE

The practical 'hands on' activity of social work with emotional abuse often consists of 'in the moment' interpersonal tasks for social workers. The direct work social workers carry out, how they make sense of complex situations, their interactions with families, children, team members and other practitioners are important

elements to be considered when developing a deeper understanding of how work with emotional abuse unfolds. The three key areas of the utilisation of evidence informed practice, use of emotions, and a relationship-based approach have been identified in the existing literature, and are introduced here by way of highlighting the more dynamic aspects of social work engagement with the practice tasks of work with emotional abuse.

### *Use of evidence informed practice to support assessment*

The ‘doing’ of social work in a child protection setting involves regular visits to households. Social workers carry out a range of tasks, including the key undertakings of identification, assessment, evidencing, intervention and review. These were outlined earlier to define the parameters of ‘work with’ emotional abuse. In order to define the nature of the risk to the child and how best to address it, a social worker will draw on a range of professional skills. Social workers have attended formal training to qualify for their practice and are encouraged to incorporate the use of research to inform their work with the use of evidence informed practice (EIP). Adapted from the medical profession, where the term evidence-based practice (EBP) is more commonly used, to a social care context, it combines the best available research evidence, professional judgment and the values and wishes of families and children to support complex decision-making (Munro 2007). EBP is still used in many social work contexts, but for the purposes of this research EIP will be referred to, with EBP as a constituent element of it. This is because EIP ‘implies that practice knowledge and intervention decisions might be enriched by prior research but not limited to it’ (Epstein 2009: 224).

Previous research with social work students has indicated that they use different forms of ‘knowledge in practice’ (Blom 2009). On a very simple level, it is possible to differentiate between ‘knowing’, which means possessing some sort of knowledge, and ‘un-knowing’, which means not having knowledge. Knowing can lead to a more evidence informed response, whereas un-knowing may lead to a more intuitive and tacit response, and the two can complement one another (Blom 2009). The practice of using EIP mainly builds on ‘verified empirical correlations’ (Blom and Moren 2010) between methods that social workers use in their practice

and the impact their practice has on the lives of the children and families they work with. EIP tends to draw more strongly on 'analytic' reasoning skills, focusing on making a clear link between cause and effect in social work situations. In a situation, for example, where a decision has to be made about whether it is in a child's best interest to remove them from the family home for reasons of emotional abuse, a social worker may draw on literature that indicates the deleterious effects of the parents' behaviour. It has been suggested that professionals struggle in the first instance to recognise it. In clinical settings, appropriate 'screening' questions may not be asked of children who present with physical concerns (Gilbert et al. 2009:169). Therefore, many cases are not detected and referred on for interventions, and this is an area that use of evidence can help to improve upon.

EIP is part of 'the rationality project' (Wesselink and Pearce 2015: 7), and is a growing movement in the field of social work (Blom and Moren 2010: 99) where resources must be directly accounted for and practice is increasingly judged by quantifiable outcomes. Insufficient knowledge about how to search for EIP and lack of time to read and reflect upon it is common amongst busy social workers. Additionally, very little is known about the ways in which social workers and other related professionals designate a case as one of emotional abuse and as a concept it is 'inadequately researched and poorly understood' (Barlow and Schrader McMillan 2010:11). Therefore an evidence base for social workers to use in relation to emotional abuse remains relatively sparse, as it is an understanding of how they apply the EIP that is available to them. An aim of this thesis, therefore, is to add to the field of EIP work with emotional abuse, and also to gain an initial sense of how social workers incorporate EIP relating to emotional abuse in their work.

Use of research to inform practice has the additional advantage of allowing a practitioner to step back when trying to manage complex cases, and process the work from a safer distance, helping the social worker to 'think about the problems in a concrete way' (Harvey 2010: 141). There can also be a sense of safety born out of the knowledge that other professionals have experienced and researched similar situations. The pursuit of 'the truth' as characterised by 'concrete factual realism' (Wesselink and Pearce 2015: 14) is one supported by most professionals working to secure the best interests of children. However, such a stance assumes that social workers are rational agents, which the premise of this research does not



support. Being effective and making 'judicious use of evidence' (Webb 2001: 61) is not as simple a task as a medical perspective suggests. The process of gathering EIP is a continuing and complex pursuit, and it is possible 'to fall back on theory, possibly as a retreat' (Harvey 2010: 141). The purpose of incorporating EIP into practice is to supplement social work judgment and decision-making rather than replace it (Webb 2001). One of the aims of this thesis is to demonstrate how social workers combine EIP with their other skills, such as building relationships with families and children.

### *The emotionally skilled practitioner*

This section focuses on the less rational skills social workers possess to assist them in interacting with clients so they can make decisions in emotionally complex situations. Use of one's own emotions to guide interventions are one way in which social workers tune into the needs of the families and children they work with, so they can offer sensitive and supportive interventions. This notion is situated in the context of the psychoanalytic work of Bion (1962) and subsequently Casement (1985) who suggested that the ability to be alongside the client, and 'to listen to the sense of pressure, as an unconscious communication' (Casement 1985: 19) is a powerful means of interacting. Workers who have 'developed emotional antennae' (Morrison 2007: 253) are better attuned to the factors that cause a person's distress, and they are also more alert to their own emotional difficulties. As emotional abuse can be difficult to assess, social workers require well-developed reasoning skills to identify when their own subjective experiences, such as the distress caused by seeing a child in pain, may be interfering with their decision-making. Munro (2008) describes two main approaches to studying how people reason: the analytic and the intuitive. Analytic reasoning is 'formal, explicit and logical' (Munro 2008: 47). Work processes are made visible through risk matrices and checklists. Analytic reasoning can be regarded as a rigorous, mathematical approach offering a systemised approach to assessments.

Intuitive reasoning quickly reaches conclusions on the basis of largely unconscious, heuristic processes. These include understanding and appreciating someone's cultural background as an influencing factor on their behaviour. There may be

more of an emphasis on using the influence of psychodynamic processes to inform decision-making. 'Tacit knowledge' (Eraut 2000) or 'practice wisdom' (Trevithick 2005) may be drawn upon as the social worker relies more on their own experiences to inform their practice. Opinions about abuse are often initially formed on 'gut reactions' and social workers can only be expected to make the 'best' decision rather than the 'right' one according to the knowledge and understandings about emotional abuse that are available. Social workers who can accept their fallibility and reconsider their gut reactions are most likely to achieve this: 'To change your mind in the light of new information is a sign of good practice' (Munro 1996: 793). Intuitive and analytic reasoning are equally important skills and to be used along a continuum rather than considered as opposite approaches to work. Both should be used at different points during the child protection process to make difficult decisions.

According to the work of Bion, thinking is not a purely rational process. It is embedded in unconscious processes and underpinned by 'a hierarchy of unsophisticated and undifferentiated body-mind states' (Alexandrov 2009: 40). There is a strong affective component to thought processes, and an aptitude for 'emotional self-efficacy' is commonly described in the literature as desirable in a social worker (Morrison 2006; Munro 2011; Grant 2014b). The term 'emotional intelligence', which is used in the literature interchangeably with emotional self-efficacy (Morrison 2007), encompasses a variety of personal attributes including empathy and self-awareness, reflective ability and emotional literacy (Morrison 2007). It is a concept that goes beyond a self-perception of competence. It is an individual social worker's assessment of their own confidence in their ability to 'execute specific skills in a particular set of circumstances and thereby achieve a successful outcome' (Holden et al. 2002: 116).

Being able to achieve insight into one's own emotional state assists in a heightened awareness of the emotional states of children and families, thereby generating 'an appropriate empathic response' (Grant et al. 2014a: 338). However, although individuals have varying capacities for 'emotional thinking', it is generally regarded as 'more of a developmental achievement than an 'automatic human capacity' (Alexandrov 2009: 40). The research indicates that although emotional self-efficacy is a desirable attribute, the attributes of it are not innate, stable characteristics, but

ones that can be developed through carefully targeted interventions. Recent research calls for a stronger focus on an 'emotional curriculum' for social work students (Grant et al. 2014(a and b): 14) to support the development of these aspects of the practice. Social workers need to be able to think deeply about the relationally complex work they engage in, in order to practice effectively. They must be able to make sense of the role they play in social work interactions as 'the reference point for an understanding of others is one's self' (Howe 1987: 113).

Personal experiences impact on how people interact and the values they develop, and therefore influence the decisions they make. A social worker's attitudes and ideals about the concept of family may influence the extent to which they want to keep a child with their parents or separate the child from them. Personal experience can enrich social worker capacity for empathy and motivation. However, without emotional literacy and reflective ability it can possibly limit professional abilities to manage emotional responses to challenging situations. Foley (1994) describes the stereotype of a child protection worker as one who has a history of being abused and who sees 'in every victim an opportunity to solve their own problems' (Foley 1994 in Pecnik and Bezensek-Lalic 2011: 540). From the stance, for example, of a social worker who has experienced their own troubling relationships, 'meaning frames' (Hollway and Jefferson 2013) are produced; the value frameworks within which we operate on a daily basis.

Practitioners must acknowledge that every individual practice encounter is unique. An aptitude for deeply critical thought or 'reflective practice' is an important part of the work. The purpose of reflective practice in social work settings is to encourage thought processes amongst workers that prevent polarised understandings about complex social issues (Ruch (2005a). Through 'reflecting on action' (Schon 1983) a social worker develops an awareness of what is happening, and is able to express it. Social workers must become more adept at reflecting on their own practice in the moment, gaining a deeper understanding of a family situation and finding a way of moving forward in their practice responses to it. By working through this process with increasing fluidity, social workers integrate self-learning into the decisions they make, thereby 'reflecting in action' (Schon 1983). Reflection is a social work context more than just hindsight, it is 'having a 'feel' for something and doing something about it' (Knott 2016: 14).

This thesis posits that an emotionally skilled practitioner has the capacity to reflect upon their individual practice and consider the ways they relate to the children, families and other professionals they encounter. They can acknowledge the impact of their way of working upon the progress of a particular case, and modify their practice if necessary. They may, perhaps, explore why they feel a lack of compassion for an abusive parent and access support from colleagues or research the relevant literature. In doing this they enable themselves to gain a deeper understanding of the presenting issues of the family concerned and how their own feelings are playing a role in their capacity to empathise with family members.

### Relationship based work

Social work can be emotionally and relationally complex. All social work interactions are 'conducted through the medium of a relationship' (Ruch 2005b: 113) regardless of whether the relationship with a child or family is short or long. The relationship can either be 'the primary means of intervention' for longer term trusting support or it can be a short term and functional 'means to an end' (Ruch 2005b: 113). It is the personal dimension to child protection work, rather than 'bureaucratic' methods, that leads to lowered levels of distress and changes in the quality of intrafamilial relationships (Barlow and Scott 2010).

Relationship-based practice in social work is informed by a range of theories, but the origins of it can be traced back to the emergence of psycho-analytic theory and practice in the 1920s and 1930s (Ruch 2005b: 114). The central feature of it in relation to social work practice is the practitioner's acknowledgment and management of their client's anxiety. Positive relational experiences with a social worker may generate feelings of security and trust in the children and families they work with. An inconsistent and hostile experience will inevitably create anxiety and mistrust (Howe 1995; Ruch 2005b). A more trusting relationship enables social workers to engage with children and families more effectively, and they will be more likely to offer honest and comprehensive information about their lives. This will in turn lead to more supportive assessments and work with individuals and families (Howe 1998; Ruch 2005b).

When assessing whether a parent-child relationship is emotionally effectual it is important that a social worker takes into account that one person's displays of warmth may be different to another's depending on various factors such as culture, gender and so on. A parent may verbally express love but not demonstrate it in their non-verbal behaviour, and vice versa. Measuring the quality of a parent-child relationships is a very complex task (Lee et al. 2011). Social work observations of parental behaviour require reflection and analysis on the part of the social worker. During observations social workers must take into account other contributing factors which may impact on parent-child behaviours, such as the pressure on them of having a social worker watching out for their displays of warmth. Interpretations made about interpersonal behaviour are subject to a degree of subjectivity on the part of the social worker; signs recognised as warmth or rejection may depend on the culturally accepted norms (both of the social worker and the parent), which they must take into consideration. A social worker must acknowledge their own expectations about what denotes a warm and loving relationship; possibly reconsidering their own assumptions about what constitutes a healthy relationship (Pecnik and Bezensek-Lalic 2011).

A relationship approach can enrich but can also complicate a child protection situation. The families that social workers interact with are not simply rational beings, and social workers are not just agents who carry out orders from the government. Social workers must have an appreciation of the 'emotional and relational complexity' of the people they are exposed to, and also the complex and multifaceted people they are themselves (Cooper 2012: 2). If clients are recognised to be emotional as well as rational beings, social workers too must acknowledge that their own emotional responses will impact on their practice (Ruch 2005b: 115). This raises questions about how statutory child protection social workers use their subjectivity to work with and within the structures available to intervene in situations of emotional abuse.

## SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE THROUGH A PSYCHOSOCIAL LENS

In a psychosocial approach to social work practice, 'ecological systems and psychodynamic perspectives have become inseparable' (Woods and Hollis 1990:

9). The inner and outer worlds of the individual are enmeshed. 'The sphere of personal life' (Roseneil in Hollway and Jefferson 2013) is influenced by a range of socially patterned and constructed factors, which produces experiences that, on the surface of it, may not seem to make sense. The less perceptible characteristics of inter-personal communications, and consequently also emotional abuse, may be made more tangible when some basic psychodynamic principles are applied. The following section examines some of the processes that come into play during relationship-based work from a psychodynamic perspective. Psychodynamic theories offer one particular lens to uncovering some of the subjective and psychological processes inherent in relationships between social workers and children, their families and other professionals. Ferguson (2004) describes this as the 'expressive domain of the psychological, emotional and symbolic' (13).

Awareness of the processes of transference and counter-transference are central to practicing work with emotional abuse using psychosocial methods. Transference is the way in which an individual relates to another, based on earlier relationships. Through early care-giving experiences 'relational templates' are formed (Lefevre 2008: 84). These templates form the basis for how individuals perceive and relate to others through life. For example, a social worker may remind a client of someone in their past, perhaps a critical aunt who they experienced as punitive and made them feel powerless. They may consequently experience feelings of hostility towards the social worker. Such transferences are likely to affect how a parent sees and responds to their child and also how they react to professionals who become involved.

'Counter-transference' is a term that covers 'the range of emotional and psychological responses the worker has to the client' (Lefevre 2008: 84). 'Proactive' counter-transference, are responses that 'belong' (ibid) to the worker. These are aspects of a social worker such as their interpersonal relationships, history and internal world they bring to relationships with clients which may lead them to respond in a particular way to a client. A social worker may experience a variety of counter-transference reactions in response to observing the parent's behaviour towards their child, for example wanting to rescue them, or feeling of gaining a sense of power during the child protection assessment process. Applying theories of transference and counter-transference helps to shine a light on the multi-faceted

ways in which social workers and children and families experience interventions. Social work has become an increasingly demanding profession in recent years. Professionals are required to intervene in complex and dysfunctional family life, whilst also being held accountable for their actions by the public. Practice has become 'more personal and laced with additional fears' (Ferguson 2004: 65). Social workers not only hold fear for the wellbeing of the children they work with, but also for themselves in the face of harsh public judgments.

Exploring other related psychodynamic processes are useful in deepening understandings of social work interactions. For example, the process of 'projective identification', which can illuminate the subtle yet powerful ways a subject, can be 'nudged, seduced, or coerced into occupying a particular position in relation to the other' (Clarke and Hoggett 2009: 13). A worker may identify with a client's projection of helplessness and consequently feel 'stuck in a loop' (Megele 2015: 33) unable to influence any change in the situation. Powerful unconscious dynamics can occur in cases of child abuse, which may cause paralysis in professionals (Harvey 2010: 139) or lead them to overlook abuse in order to defend against painful emotional responses (Cooper and Lousada, 2005; Rustin, 2005).

From a Freudian or Kleinian psychoanalytic perspective, we are all anxious, and we defend against our anxieties. It is a common response for families under pressure of child protection investigations to engage in defence mechanisms such as 'splitting'. Splitting is a process that originates in childhood, and is a defensive mechanism carried into later life. It 'oscillates between external and internal manifestations' (Tennison 2002: 1). 'Splitting' when it is 'done' to others occurs when, for example, a service-user praises or condemns different professionals. The professionals concerned internalise these feelings of being valued or devalued and may carry a sense of being good or bad at their job. They may act out the projection of this, responding by liking or disliking the client, which may be played out in relationships between them and other team members.

Social workers deal with high levels of risk on a daily basis leading to anxiety resembling 'a vein that throbs throughout the child protection process' (Morrison 1997: 196). In order to defend against anxiety, social workers may themselves develop defence mechanisms such as splitting, particularly in relation to the organisation they work for when they feel that they are not being supported

sufficiently to do their job. They may have idealised the notion of being a social worker and 'doing good' at an earlier stage, during their pre-practice training. In an institutional sense they may regard their employer as a 'bad' mother, becoming increasingly angry at the organisation they work for, when the circumstances they are operating under make it difficult to work effectively.

Unconscious mirroring between families and professionals is another example of a psychological process, which may impact on a worker's assessments and interventions. A worker's interpretations of a child's experiences may be influenced by how the worker internally processes a situation (Lefevre 2008; Rustin 2005). They may sense how a child is feeling and unconsciously act out similar feelings. A sense of helplessness evoked by the child's situation may elicit feelings in workers of wanting to get away from the home they are visiting. They may 'split off' from what they witnessed, unable to process their discomfort at the child's pain. Alternatively, they may want to rescue the child and persecute the parent. These kind of destructive interaction that can occur between parents, children and the social worker result in a 'drama triangle' (Karpman 1968) where conflicts are played out as the three individuals shift between the roles of victim, persecutor and rescuer.

Social workers commonly experience a range of emotional responses to the risky situations they encounter and the people they work with. The psychological process of projection commonly occurs in professionals who work in risky situations every day and feel 'bombarded' by their experiences. Feelings of anger, fear, shame and guilt (Kemper 2002) may be felt in situations where a sense of loss of power and status is generated through family interactions. In a situation where a client feels angry, they may not be willing to acknowledge this feeling and instead ascribe anger to other people they come into contact with. The social worker may also go through the same experience, finding it hard to feel sadness or anger, and instead imagine the child is feeling sad or angry, thereby projecting their feelings onto them. They may disguise these feelings, overreact to the situation or try to compensate for them. Their reactions might seem different to their more normal behaviour; 'they may find themselves behaving in a way that is not typical of them, for example being punitive or indulgent' (Bower 2005: 4).

If the feelings evoked during work can be tolerated and acknowledged then the social worker may be in a better position to understand the unconscious dynamics



being communicated by the family (Harvey 2010: 139) and respond effectively. Social workers may use these emotional reactions to better effect by noticing the projection of emotions, using their feelings as functional tools to attune and guide them towards recognising the harmful and complex family dynamics, rather than enacting the projections of others. Psychodynamic theory indicates that the first step to engaging effectively with these complicated and potentially distressing processes is developing the capacity to recognise them. Awareness of these layers of interpersonal communications enables the social worker to ensure they are not preoccupied by their own feelings, and reacting to their own discomfort instead of maintaining their focus on the child.

If the feelings evoked during work cannot be tolerated and acknowledged it is possible that the social worker will work less effectively with the case, and systematic distancing is a possible outcome. Stepping far away from the painful realities of a case, and an over-reliance on forensic aspects of the situation of the depersonalisation can result in depersonalisation of the child and their family. Menzies-Lyth (1960) depicted the struggles of nurses to reconcile the stresses of their role by the way they referred to patients in diagnostic terms as ‘the liver in bed 10’ or ‘the pneumonia in bed 15’ (Menzies-Lyth 1960: 444). Social workers may quickly start describing families in their caseload as the ‘domestic violence ones’ or ‘mum with mental health’ and so on, which feels less personal than using their names.

Much has been discussed in academic literature about the Laming report into the death of Victoria Climbié (2003), which indicated recurrent themes of professional incompetence, including the absence of detailed written notes, inter-professional sharing of information and adequate supervision. The question is *why* an apparently competent social worker allocated to the Victoria Climbié case ‘lamentably failed to see what was crying out to be seen’ (London Borough of Brent 1985 cited in Cooper and Lousada 2005: 145). Although there is no one straightforward answer to this, ‘turning a blind eye’ (Cooper and Lousada 2005: 103) is a common human reaction to distressing situations of child abuse; workers can become paralysed or seek to withdraw themselves from difficult situation. Systematic distancing from children by social workers is arguably the most

dangerous aspect of contemporary child protection that appears most resistant to change (Ferguson 2004: 21).

Having surveyed the literature about the challenges of working with emotional abuse in addition to broader research about the impact child protection work can have on social workers, it is possible to theorise that systematic distancing might be more likely in cases where children are experiencing emotional abuse, because turning a blind eye is the most manageable response given the limited knowledge we have about emotional abuse, and the resources available to address it. It is therefore useful to turn to consideration of the subjective nature of social work practice in greater depth.

## CHAPTER CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have introduced some of the key contextualising aspects of social work with emotional abuse, which opens up the subject to an in-depth exploration of why it is a complicated issue for social work practice to address. Reports of emotional abuse and registration of children experiencing harm as a consequence of it are growing, and previous research indicates that much more needs to be understood about it. Childhood emotional abuse is an area in need of greater professional attention and resources (Trickett et al. 2011).

There are a number of practical reasons for its complexity, such as definitions and barriers to recognising it (Ferguson 2004) that will be considered in the literature review in the next chapter. In addition to this, the literature review will set out what is known about a social worker's thought processes in relation to carrying out child protection, particularly in relation to work with emotional abuse. Although aspects of statutory social work such as law and policy help to guide decision-making, the literature indicates official guidance does not 'exist in a vacuum' (Brammer 2007: 19). Legal solutions are additionally problematic to achieve owing to the complexity of meeting thresholds of significant harm. They tend to occur in the case of the most severe and persistent cases where harm is more evident, or other forms of abuse are present too. Social workers often feel uncertain of their own abilities to

represent the interests of a child experiencing emotional abuse when entering the legal arena.

A social worker's subjective interpretations and associated values may play a significant role in labelling a case as abusive. As mechanisms such as law and policy have limitations in respect of emotional abuse, much decision-making falls on 'professional judgement'. The experience of the individual social worker in relation to work with emotional abuse is, in the context of this research, regarded to be an important consideration that must be addressed.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **INTRODUCTION: WHAT THIS LITERATURE REVIEW IS, AND IS NOT**

This chapter reviews relevant literature about child protection work with emotional abuse. The goal is not to present a systematic review of definitions of emotional abuse, or an exhaustive report on the subject of emotional abuse. The purpose is to demonstrate through previous research that it is a complex area, which remains contested, particularly in the domains of definition and identification. The primary focus is to present a social work perspective of the areas of assessment and work with emotional abuse. By reviewing some key aspects of the available literature I aim to show what the social work profession does not know about how we work with emotional abuse, thereby providing scaffolding to support an in-depth exploration of the subject.

Following the setting out the parameters of the literature review, the first part of this chapter gives an explanation, according to social work assessment criteria, of what constitutes 'good enough' parenting in relation to emotional warmth and stability. This is accompanied by contrasting descriptors of parenting that is potentially emotionally harmful. A review of the available literature which describes the kinds of factors that influence or cause the occurrence of emotional abuse follows this, along with what is known about the harmful short term and long-term outcomes for a child. Tools used to support assessment and approaches to interventions are then discussed in order to bring focus to practice through a psychosocial lens. A discussion of the impact of the nature of support provided in the workplace concludes the chapter. The summary of the ground covered considers what the review has indicated to me is lacking in current knowledge about working with emotional abuse, and how this research may be used to address some of those gaps.

## PARAMETERS AND METHODS OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW

In this review the term 'emotional abuse' is used rather than any other term, such as, for example, 'psychological abuse'. Emotional abuse is the description of behaviour that is used in CA89 and the term English social workers use on a day-to-day basis to encapsulate other similar parental behaviours such as psychological abuse. The review is informed by English language literature. It has been gathered from peer reviewed journals and books published by English speaking countries. Additionally, many international authors write in English as many journals demand it. The literature used is relevant to English social work practice, drawing on related disciplines such as psychology and health care. The fieldwork is carried out in England, so the review prioritises studies carried out in this country. However, as emotional abuse is an under researched area (Barlow and Schrader-MacMillan 2009), the literature review draws more substantially on research from other countries where the notion of emotional abuse is acknowledged as a cause for concern. These countries include Sweden, North America and Australia, and are selected because they recognise the concept of emotional abuse and the need for interventions in a similar way to the social work discipline in England. The American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) (1995: [www.apsac.org](http://www.apsac.org)), for example uses similar definitions to those used in England in relation to acts of omissions and commission in parenting.

The literature reviewed is restricted to material produced after 1980, when emotional abuse became a category of child maltreatment for inclusion on child protection registers in England (Cawson 2000; Evans 2002; Iwaniec 1997). Since then, numbers of children in England and other countries, which record figures about children experiencing emotional abuse, have steadily increased. Key databases utilised for searches were SCOPUS and ASSIA and The NSPCC Library Online. Search terms, which included phrases such as 'child protection+emotional abuse' and 'child welfare emotional maltreatment' are detailed in Appendix 1. A systematic and well-documented audit trail is important throughout the research process (MacLure 2005; Sharland 2012) so I have maintained a system of spreadsheets and tables to evidence my trail of work (see Appendix 1).

There is not one single agreed definition of emotional abuse, and there are many different ways of describing it. 'Mental child abuse' (SOU 2001:72) is a term used in

Sweden to describe the same concept. Therefore, much literature both within England and in other regions may be relevant, but not immediately searchable. A thorough, methodical search using additional terms has been necessary to reduce the possibility of missing key references. The incorporation of words such as 'resilience', 'attachment' and 'supervision' in search terms when exploring specific issues around emotional development and workplace mechanisms have helped narrow the searches for relevant material.

I found many references via the 'snowball' research technique (Ridley 2008), with relevant authors and journals signposted by the literature. Feedback and suggestions from other professionals and colleagues during attendance at conferences, seminars and workshops during the course of the research process have also provided opportunities to locate up-to-date material from social work research and other allied professions. Literature from allied disciplines often covers areas of interest, which may not have been adequately considered within social work research. Diversions into allied disciplines including psychological literature and paediatric research have therefore been required to fully scope the area. For example the work of paediatrician, Glaser (2012) along with colleagues from criminology and child mental health offer a multidisciplinary model for identifying and working with emotional abuse. Clinical psychologist Turnbull (2010b) carried out doctoral research about professional reporting of emotional abuse. This also proved to be a useful resource. Using this wide-ranging approach when carrying out a literature review of a particular subject is a useful strategy. Sharing research across disciplines often allows for an innovative use of information sources.

## HOW DO SOCIAL WORKERS DEFINE AND RECOGNISE EMOTIONAL ABUSE?

### *Some problems with agreeing on what constitutes emotional abuse*

The literature indicates that nationally there are high proportions of cases designated as emotionally abusive in child protection planning, yet definitions of emotional abuse remain disputed (Smith-Slep et al. 2011). There is no single agreed definition, and from surveying the literature it would appear that how emotional abuse is referred to can vary according to the country it is identified in. English social workers use the term emotional abuse to encapsulate all of the 'passive' and 'active' aspects of harm (NSPCC 2013). In the US the term 'psychological maltreatment' is used (APSAC 1995) because it subsumes all of the 'affective and cognitive aspects' of child abuse (Hart and Brassard 1987: 160).

When searching for what constitutes emotional abuse, it is important for the definition to be explicit, and for the social worker to be clear on its harmful effects (O'Hagan 1995). The term 'psychological', O'Hagan (1995) argues, refers to behaviour that damages a child's *mental* function, such as their ability to concentrate. He says that the term emotional abuse should describe attacks on the child's experience of emotional life. Conversely, Glaser (2002) argues that cognition and emotion are not independent of each other so it is not possible to separate them. Glaser prefers the interchangeable use of 'emotional abuse and neglect' and 'psychological maltreatment'. Other authors often group the terms emotional and psychological abuse together (Shull 2011), while some choose the term psychological maltreatment to describe it (Brassard & Donovan 2006; Garbarino et al. 1986).

Explanations of what constitutes childhood emotional abuse are altered to reflect progressions in research about the harmful effects on a child's development and later life mental health. The crucial point is that in identifying emotional abuse a social worker is making a strong statement that what a child is experiencing has gone beyond what is 'acceptable or reasonable' (Sable 1999: 63). A key issue debated in the existing literature concerns whether the definition of emotional

abuse should refer to the maltreating behaviour of the parent, to the consequences for the child, or to both (McGee and Wolfe 1991; Iwaniec 2003; Hamarman & Bernet 2000 cited in Glaser: 2002). Glaser (2002) suggests that evidence of the ill treatment by the parent rather than harm to the child should be sought as the harmful effects on the child may not be immediately obvious (for example with mental health outcomes which do not always show until adulthood).

In part due to a lack of consensus around a definition for emotional abuse, research on the developmental impact of emotional abuse is not at the same stage as other forms of abuse. This has resulted in 'difficulties in the operationalisation' (Trickett et al. 2011: 876) of emotional abuse. As a consequence, confusion exists amongst social workers and other professionals they work alongside about how to recognise it. There have been recent, thorough reviews of the literature by researchers Barlow and Schrader-McMillan (2010), Turnbull (2010b) and Iwaniec (1996) who draw on material by key authors including Brassard and Donovan (2006) and Garbarino et al. (1986) in order to comprehensively discuss the defining characteristics of emotional abuse. What unites all of this research is the amount of detail that is required in order to adequately set the parameters of what the phenomenon encompasses. Garbarino (2011) articulates the frustration of being unable to neatly define emotional abuse in a 'final list'.

Another debate concerns differentiating between emotional abuse and neglect, which are both chronic conditions (Brown and Ward 2012). Either can persist over months and years without leading to a crisis that demands immediate, authoritative action by professionals. Emotional abuse has many similar characteristics to neglect, in the omissions and commissions of parental behaviour, a parent's lack of attention or attunement could be interpreted as falling into one or both categories. In addition to this, harm is 'closer to normative parental behaviour patterns than physical or sexual abuse' (Brown and Ward 2012: 55) as it encompasses a wide range of parental attitudes and behaviours, making it more challenging to define when thresholds of 'significant harm' are met. In addition to this, social workers may encounter behaviours such as a parent shouting at a child over a long period of time, and become accustomed to it. They may come to regard it as part of the way they communicate. These key factors may contribute to practitioners normalising parental maltreatment.



It is also possible to differentiate between emotional abuse and emotional neglect, an approach some other European countries take. The key difference between abuse and neglect is that emotional abuse involves active parental hostility (such as denigrating or berating the child) whereas emotional neglect refers more to parental unavailability or absence of appropriate emotional response to the child (such as a parent being unable to offer warmth, affection and positive regard to the child) (Iwaniec 2003). This helps to differentiate between omissions and commissions in carer behaviour. Both may have detrimental effects on the child but how the practitioner understands and works with this to reduce future risk of recurrence could differ substantially.

### *Key concepts in recognising acceptable emotional care*

In relation to the harmful effects of parenting on children's emotional wellbeing, the social work literature often discusses what constitutes 'good enough' care. It has been suggested that more debate about what constitutes 'acceptable and unacceptable parenting' (Brown and Ward 2014: 266) is required. According to the literature about emotional abuse, ideas about what meets the thresholds of this care are built on the premise that all individuals have a basic need for positive responses from others (Iwaniec 1995). The literature suggests that secure relationships experienced during childhood equip people with a template for future relationships that are safe and trusting (e.g. Barlow and Schrader-Macmillan 2009; Iwaniec 1995). Social workers who enter family homes to assess a child whose wellbeing and developmental outcomes are of concern, will seek out signs of positive emotional and physical development. A social worker may, for example, try to find out if caregivers have made secure and warm relationships with their child, giving the child a 'sense of belonging' (Hart et al. 2007). A child who receives care that encourages feelings of acceptance, safety and predictability is more likely develop appropriate basic functioning. This gives them the building blocks to create similarly positive relationships throughout their life course.

'Object relations' are a development of Freudian psychoanalytic theory, which places 'relationship at the heart of what it is to be human' (Gomez 1997:1). In order to gain an insight into parent-child interactions, social workers often incorporate

aspects of the object relations tradition to help them make sense of the relationships they assess. Klein (1946) developed object relations from Freudian theory by focusing on the notion of subjectivity and the individual's inner world. According to Klein (1952) an infant is 'object-related from birth' (in Shuttleworth 1989: 24). A key aspect derived from Kleinian theory that is in common use today is the process of 'projective identification'. During feeding in infancy, a child's projections on to the mother's breast are experienced as what Klein described as the polarised emotions of 'bad' breast (when hungry) and 'good' breast (when fed). Bad or unacceptable parts of the self are disowned and attributed to another in a process of projection (Segal 1992).

It can be difficult for a young child to regard their mother as being both good and bad at the same time, which is how the splitting process occurs. 'Splitting' is a psychological mechanism by which a child can preserve a sense of happiness under negative circumstances by polarising the characters of people in their lives as good or bad. These primitive 'unconscious defenses against anxiety' (Hollway and Jefferson 2013: 17) are the basis for the 'paranoid-schizoid' position, where the ego from infancy has learned to 'split the loved object from the hated object' (Theodosius 2006: 905). As a child develops, they gradually become capable of thinking more congruously and seeing the whole picture. They learn more sophisticated patterns of relating to their mother and other objects in the world, and they enter a depressive stage, where they reconcile the good with the bad.

However, this defence mechanism of splitting often persists into adult life, re-emerging in the face of threats, and serves as an effective means of protecting the good from the bad. This splitting mechanism 'permits us to believe in a good object, on which we can rely, uncontaminated by 'bad' threats, which have been split off and located elsewhere' (Hollway and Jefferson 2013: 18). Social workers often encounter parents who use the defensive splitting mechanism in their family relationships. A parent may, for example, position one child as good and another as bad, with one child 'unrealistically idealised at the expense of others' (Preston-Shoot and Agass 1990: 40).

From the point of view of a social worker, a parent who cultivates an environment where a child is singled out for reward or punishment out can be emotionally harmful. Role modeling this interpersonal behaviour to a child may promote the

splitting process and prevent them from developing their own ability to integrating the good and the bad congruously. Theorists have developed the idea that a parent who engages in very polarised thought processes may pressurise their children into 'acting out their parents' own disowned and projected 'bad' impulses' (Preston-Shoot and Agass 1990: 40). These are some of the aspects of a family system a social worker may want to spend some time gaining a bigger picture of, in order to support the family in adjusting the way they communicate with one another.

In addition to operating as a defensive mechanism, the function of projective identification functions as a way of interacting. Sometimes children can only 'communicate an unspeakable inner state' (Preston-Shoot and Agass 1990: 40) by getting another to experience it for them. A child who may feel angry or despairing requires 'containment' by an adult in order to process these feelings. 'Containment' is a developmental principle of object relations theory in which a parents' role is to establish a safe and secure environment in which their child can grow. Bion (1967) saw this in terms of the container (mother) and contained (infant). The concept is both a physical and emotional one; a receptive mother forestalls shock or distress until the baby is able to manage these difficult emotions. The mother experiences the feelings of the infant, processes them, and communicates the 'detoxified' feelings back to the infant, who can feel them to be bearable.' (Hollway 2006b). In this way the developing child learns how to manage their own difficult feelings with their own internal resources.

The function of parental containment is a particularly relevant aspect of self that may be missing from the early years of a child who has experienced emotional neglect. Without the kind of emotional protection described here, a baby may grow into a child who feels disproportionately afraid and unable to cope with the challenges of everyday life. As they get older, particularly during adolescence, a young person may be unable to maintain a coherent sense of self, and experience tension in psychologically adjusting to becoming an adult (Briggs and Hingley Jones 2011).

Parents who did not experience containment as a child themselves may be unable to replicate it for their own child. If a parent cannot manage their own difficult feelings and consequently those of their child either, a cycle of escalating anxiety and distress may build within a family home. Pediatrician Winnicott's (1962) ideas

about 'holding' are a principle of object relations theory. It is both the physical and emotional capacity of a caregiver for emotional closeness and relaxed personal boundaries. A caregiver should be able to hold the baby together through attunement to their 'needs and inner states' (Gomez 1997: 88). A parent may lack the capacity and imagination to be able to achieve this by themselves (Gomez 1997; Preston-Shoot and Agass 1990). In their work with the parent, the social worker may be able to function as a sort of 'container' for them. Hearing their distress and soothing them, offers them an opportunity to reduce their anxiety and fear. This creates space for the parent to develop their ability to hold the baby effectively, using similar attunement and compassion to care for their child (Fraiberg et al. 1983). This may be a demanding process for the social worker, as the relationship with the parent may stir up difficult feelings in themselves, such as fear and rejection. They must be able to manage their own emotional reactions and use them to work with the parent, rather than being overwhelmed by the experience (Preston-Shoot and Agass 1990).

A child's experiences of their parent's caregiving impacts on the stability of their relationship, and on how the child goes on to form relationships with other people. Attachment theory is commonly used by social workers to understand the worlds of the families they encounter, and the nature of their relationships. It has been incorporated by social workers in their practice since Bowlby's (1951) development of it during the Second World War (Pierson 2011). Prior to Bowlby's work the child was viewed as a 'rational, unitary individual' (Hollway 2006a: 9), whose needs were assessed according to traditional life-stage models such as Piaget's cognitive-developmental stages (Hollway 2006b). Evacuated children who suffered maternal deprivation and loss were observed for the impact on their resulting behaviours and attachment patterns.

Ainsworth, along with Bowlby, is regarded as the 'co-founder' of Attachment Theory (Gomez 1997: 159). 'The strange situation' was an experiment she conducted which recorded a baby's reactions to separation. This revealed a baby's 'internal model of relationship' (Gomez 1997: 159), which could be related back to the mother's behaviours and responsiveness. From this three main categories of relationship were defined as secure, insecure-avoidant, and insecure-ambivalent. A fourth category defined later is insecure-disorganised (see table 2 below). For

social workers observing parent-child relationships, attachment theory can be a helpful means of assessing for the impact of parenting style, emotional deprivation and adverse experiences on child development. A securely attached child has learned to trust that other people will take care of them. To develop a secure attachment a small child needs an 'emotionally available' adult who is tuned in enough to help regulate their emotions (Gerhardt 2004: 48).

**Table 2:** Attachment Styles. Adapted from Gomez (1997: 160)

<b>Secure</b>	<b>Insecure-avoidant</b>	<b>Insecure-ambivalent</b>	<b>Insecure-disorganised</b>
Upset by separation but demanded and received care from mother on her return.	Not overtly upset when mother left. Ignored her on return, but watched her acutely and unable to play freely.	Panicked by separation and simultaneously clung to her and fought her off on return. Unable to return to own activity.	Confused and chaotic. Bizarre patterns of repetitive movements or frozen paralysis expressing their bewilderment.

The child may demonstrate being able to enthusiastically explore the world beyond their caregiver in the knowledge that they have an adult to return to (Gomez 1997). This sense of security makes them more likely to develop trust in others, which may be identified through their being able to enjoy interactions with a 'responsive other' (Gomez 1997: 161). A securely attached child subsequently forms successful relationships, develops fewer behavioural problems (Kochanska 2012), and cultivates 'an inner representation of a loveable self' (Gomez 1997: 161). Conversely, a child with an insecure attachment has learned that adults are not reliable, and consequently they do not trust easily. They may have experienced being emotionally cut off and unregulated by an adult figure. Stress hormones, such as cortisol, may rise (Gerhardt 2004) and they may feel anxious and abandoned. A child who receives daily caregiving in an environment that feels

unsafe or unpredictable, may experience adverse effects to their basic functioning, such as their capacity to respond appropriately to feelings of distress. A child with an insecure ambivalent attachment style can develop insecure ways of relating to others as they become afraid that significant figures in their life will be unavailable or unresponsive to their needs (Sable 1999). They may react with a 'push/pull' attitude to parental care: craving warmth but anticipating rejection.

Observation of childhood attachment behaviour and parent-child interactions is a key social work approach to assessing whether a parent has sufficient capacity to meet their child's developmental needs (Bowlby 1951; Fonagy et al. 2002).

Indicators of emotional abuse can be identified through observing the interactions between a caregiver and child. In family situations identified by a social worker as clearly emotionally abusive, an attachment relationship with the primary caregiver may be 'insecure and mutually antagonistic' (Iwaniec 2003: 54). However, there are complications when using attachment theory to help assess for acceptable standards of parental emotional care. A child can have a secure attachment relationship with their parent whilst simultaneously experiencing their emotionally harmful behaviour. For example, a parent may be overprotective of their child (Glaser 2002). In trying to shield them from harm, they may prevent them from engaging fully in everyday life and from socialising with other children. In the presence of others a parent may display the signs of building a secure attachment with their child. Social workers may not notice emotional neglect of a child, such as rejecting behaviour, if it only occurs in private when no one else is watching (Iwaniec 2003).

To compound the complications of using attachment theory to assess for a child's healthy emotional development, research indicates that children, who experience emotionally inadequate caregiving, rarely reject their abusive parent. The basic underlying need for attachment and a connection means that 'a bad object is better than no object at all' (Fairbairn 1943 cited in Sable 1999: 61). Therefore, even if a social worker is concerned about a parent-child relationship and its link to potential emotional abuse, use of attachment theory alone may not justify significant cause for action.

Good emotional parenting facilitates the development of resilience (Rees 2012). Resilience is the presence of protective factors in a child's life that enables them to

successfully 'adapt in the face of adversity' (Iwaniec et al. 2006: 79). One of the ways that children learn to overcome challenges is being able to return to the secure base of a nearby caregiver for support, when they need it. Children who are developing in a normal way and demonstrate resilience tend to have been exposed to fewer risks for a shorter timescales. Experiencing adversity in 'manageable doses' (Trowell 1983) supports normal development. There are many other protective factors that may contribute to strengthening a child's resilience. The ability to adjust and thrive in spite of a stressful environment (Brownlee et al. 2103: 437) can be enhanced by factors in both a child's external or internal domains. External resiliency factors may include friendships, family, school and wider community links. Internal factors include personal qualities such as self-control, self-efficacy and personal strengths (Iwaniec et al. 2006).

Causal links between emotional abuse and child development are not simple and invariant (Garbarino 2011: 799). For example, the concept of resilience is a contested one, as it can be difficult to differentiate between 'real resilience' (Hart et al. 2007) in a child and one who is 'functionally resilient'. An emotionally abused child may, for example, show signs of resilience such as being focused on working hard at school. They may display compliance in the presence of their parents and authority figures, and be observed by a social worker to be carrying out an apparently operative life. However, the child may be concealing a poor quality of inner life, or not recognise their experiences as deficient, as it is all they have come to know (Iwaniec 2003).

A child's perceived levels of resilience may tip the balance against a social work intervention where emotional abuse is a concern. Perhaps, for example, a mother has a mental illness and is, at times, emotionally neglectful of their child. If a relative takes care of the child when the mother is struggling, and the child appears to be functioning well in spite of the mother's deficits, the child may be considered to be resilient enough, under these circumstances, not to receive further support (Donovan and Brassard 2011). Even without the buffer of a competent and caring parent, some abused children are not automatically overwhelmed by their negative experiences. They may possess a range of alternative protective factors that influence how they, as a child and subsequently as an adult, bounce back from the challenges life presents them with (Garbarino 2011).

The presence of protective factors such as intelligence and alternative good relationships with other supportive adults, perhaps a teacher or a relative, may ensure positive self-worth is developed in spite of the harmful influence of an abusive caregiver. Care giving can exist within the context of the wider ecological system of the child's environment. A child may draw on the resources they have at their disposal. The level of resilience a child possesses must be taken into consideration when assessing if their system of caregiving is acceptably providing them with the stability and protection they require (Barlow with Scott 2010).

However, emotionally abused children may lack secure attachments or a supportive caregiver to return to for comfort and guidance during exposure to risk. They may be rebuked for seeking attention and left feeling isolated and uncared for. Children who are abused may encounter adversity in larger doses (Trowell 1983) than what is considered to be normal. Those with 'maladaptive adjustment' tend to have been exposed to a greater number of risks for longer periods (Rutter 2002; Iwaniec et al. 2007). It may take a social worker some time to differentiate between those situations where a child *appears* to be 'coping', and those where a child has the genuine resilience to be able to recover quickly from the set-backs they are experiencing.

Research indicates that emotional abuse hinders resilience (Donovan and Brassard 2011) and is particularly damaging to self-esteem (Iwaniec 2007). The belittling nature of harm such as singling out or verbal abuse, for example, 'directly targets a child's worth through internalisation of sustained negative criticism' (Iwaniec 2007: 207). Children who have experienced inadequate emotional care may not develop resilience and consequently they may struggle to develop the ability to cope with other difficult life experiences such as disability and poverty. The literature suggests that emotionally abused children are at higher risk of having a negative, 'unrealistically skewed' Garbarino (2011: 799) experience of the world. This early learning about relationships with other people may lead a child to experience intimate relationships which are deficient, if they are able to form close, trusting relationships at all. Garbarino (2011) quotes Mark Twain:

*"if the only tool you have is hammer, you are likely to define every problem as a nail (799)".*



Garbarino added that if every problem is defined as a nail, 'the only tool you need is a hammer' (2011:799). Research indicates that if children who are experiencing emotional abuse are removed from an abusive situation, they may begin to exhibit resilience (Iwaniec 1996), suggesting that a child does not necessarily sustain long-term damage and that when an acceptable level of emotional care is introduced, a child's level of resilience can improve quickly.

### Assessing parental attributes and behaviours

Rather than concentrating on the common characteristics of emotionally abused children, some research indicates that considering parental characteristics as indicators of potential harm (Chamberland et al. 2012) is a more useful focus for interventions. Therefore, understanding why parents emotionally abuse their children is important in deciding how to work with them. Parenting approaches are often derived from the behaviours people experienced from their own parents when they were growing up. A 'constellation of personal and interpersonal conflicts' (Reder and Duncan 2001: 417) can often be found in families where parents who have adverse childhood experiences reproduce cycles of generational harm in the maltreatment of their own children. Abuse is often associated with parents' own experiences of maltreatment (Iwaniec et al. 2006). Analysis of statistical information indicates that parents who have a history of childhood abuse are nearly twice as likely to have a child on the Child Protection Register (Sneddon et al. 2010). However, it is important to note that continued cycles of abuse through subsequent generations are not inevitable, and only one per cent of abused parents actually go on to maltreat their children (Sneddon et al. 2010).

A complex combination of parental behaviour may produce emotionally harmful consequences (Turnbull 2010b), making it a challenge for social workers to summarise exactly how abuse may be arising from parenting behaviours. Research teams including Glaser and Prior (2002), Brassard and Donovan (2006), Barlow and Schrader-MacMillan (2010) and Smith Slep et al. (2011) have reviewed the definition systems available for emotional abuse. Brassard and Donovan's comprehensive definitional framework is regularly cited (see Trickett et al. 2009; Turnbull 2010b and Barlow and Shrader-McMillan 2010): they use the APSAC

(1995) categories as a starting point and go on to develop sub-sections which indicate key variations of potentially emotionally harmful parental behaviour. Barlow and Schrader-MacMillan's (2010) condensed version of the Brassard and Donovan framework is shown here (table 3). The categories provided by this framework are broad, and it is likely that this is not a 'complete' list of how emotional harm may occur. The table does serve as a useful overview for the parental behaviours that can lead to the occurrence of emotional abuse.

**Table 3:** Barlow and Schrader-MacMillan's (2010) condensed version of the Brassard and Donovan (2006) Defining Psychological Maltreatment Framework  
Subcategories of parental/caregiver behaviour towards child

**Spurning**

- Belittling, denigrating, or other rejecting
- Ridiculing for showing normal emotions
- Singling out
- Humiliating in public

**Terrorising**

- Placing in unpredictable/chaotic circumstances
- Placing in recognisably dangerous situations
- Having rigid/unrealistic expectations accompanied by threats if not met
- Threatening /perpetrating violence against the child
- Threatening/perpetrating against child's loved ones/objects- includes exposure to domestic violence

**Isolating Exploiting/corrupting**

- Confining within the environment
- Restricting social interactions in community
- Modelling, permitting, or encouraging antisocial behaviour
- Modelling, permitting, or encouraging developmentally inappropriate behaviour
- Restricting/undermining psychological autonomy
- Restricting/interfering with cognitive development

**Denying emotional responsiveness**

- Providing little or no warmth, nurturing, praise during any developmental period in childhood

**Mental health/legal/medical neglect**

- Limiting a child's access to necessary health care due to reasons other than inadequate resources

Emotionally abusive caregiving may stem from various unresolved issues. Behaviour may be related to undisclosed reasons in the parent's personal history and it can take time to identify the influences that are motivating their behaviour. Acts of domestic violence are often associated with 'discontinuities of caregiving' in a parents' own childhood (Glaser 2011). Parental behaviour may be influenced by reasons they are not fully conscious of, such as a low sense of their own self-worth. Research indicates parental characteristics such as deficiencies in their own upbringing, substance misuse or mental health issues (Forrester and Harwin 2006; Barlow and Schrader-Macmillan 2010) are a strong indicator of whether a parent will be able to care for and address the emotional needs of their child (Chamberland et al. 2012). Perhaps, as a consequence of these circumstances, parents may suffer from low self-esteem and anxiety. This can, for example, lead to parents to being highly critical of their children or partner, and expressing less affection (Hart and Brassard 1987).

Parents who are preoccupied with their own difficult emotional experiences may have unrealistic expectations of a child's level of comprehension or attribute intentionality to their 'naughty' behaviour. A parent preoccupied with their own unmet needs may neglect the needs of their child (Barlow with Scott 2010). Their distress may be considerably more prominent and engulfing than that of the child, to the extent that a social worker may also become preoccupied with the parent's needs, attending to them rather than to the needs of the child. A parent's own attachment patterns will influence the way in which they interact with their child. For example, a maltreating mother identified as having her own 'insecure-avoidant' attachment pattern may exhibit a rejecting and hostile parenting style. Such a parent may express her anger at the child and implement physical punishments as an alternative way of managing the demands her child's needs are placing upon her. This rejecting response allows for withdrawal from the 'attachment demands' (Reder and Duncan 2001: 418) that she feels unable to meet.

Some parents lack the emotional capacity to provide emotional care for their child. A growing number of studies are finding a causal relationship between poor parental mental health and child abuse (Chamberland et al. 2012; Glaser and Prior 1997; Iwaniec et al. 2007). Maternal caregiver depression has been related to a range of negative behaviours, including lower levels of maternal sensitivity and

increased levels of hostility towards the child (Barlow and Schrader-Mcmillan 2010). Parents without issues stemming from their own childhood maltreatment or mental health concerns would normally recognise a child's behaviour as age appropriate and not deliberately provocative. However, a parent who is experiencing depression may, for example, find it difficult to tolerate a child who expresses an opinion which differs to theirs (Barlow and Schrader-Mcmillan 2010; Iwaniec et al. 2006; Sneddon et al. 2010). They may discourage them from engaging in thought processes and feelings that lead to disparities in their respective views of the world. A child's emotional autonomy may be inhibited; their ability to engage as an independent individual in the wider world may be limited as a consequence of being related to in this way. Maternal verbal aggression has been associated with adverse consequences for children at all stages of their life. A negative view of self and social problems are key outcomes of this (Donovan and Brassard 2011).

A parent with their own difficulties may not manage their stress reactions well and struggle to care for their own child, particularly when they become irritable or make demands upon them. The parent may blame the children for provoking their own stressful feelings. Research indicates that a father who has experienced punitive and rejecting behaviour during childhood by his own parents may experience 'impaired impulse control, feelings of worthlessness and misuse alcohol' (Reder and Duncan 2001: 415-16). A father who, for example, finds that his partner is unavailable to him as she is caring for the child may revisit childhood experiences of separation. This may spark a 'control crisis' (Reder and Duncan 2001) leading to an outburst of anxiety and anger. The father may perceive his partner and the child's behaviour as rejecting or perhaps feel that his own competence is threatened, experiencing a 'frightening loss of self-control' (Reder and Duncan 2001: 416). Needing to regain control he may react in an impulse-ridden way. This is just one of a number of different possible process that may contribute to 'unresolved care and control conflicts' (Reder and Duncan 2001: 417) that a parent may experience.

Sometimes a parent may have negative perceptions of their child and propagate a noxious relationship with them. Parental perceptions consist of the way parents view their child and how they justify their feelings towards them (Iwaniec 2003). Negative perceptions of the child, may arise for a number of different reasons. The

aspect of singling out occurs as an aspect of 'spurning' (Rushton and Dance 2005) and is one possibility. A child could be a representation of some other figure, such as a birth father, for which one parent carries negative feelings (Butler and Drakeford 2011). This has been called 'the meaning of the child' (Reder and Duncan 1993). Marital tensions may be displaced onto this sibling and it is what Reder and Lucey hypothesis happened in the relationships between Maria Colwell and her family. Maria Colwell died at the hands of her stepfather in 1973. Maria's birth coincided with her father's death and Maria's presence inspired an unbearable sadness in her mother, causing her mother to treat her differently to her siblings.

Parents who have singled a child out may be indifferent or rejecting of them, and construe the child as deliberately difficult in some way (Chirichella-Besemer and Motta 2008). A parent may create physical and emotional distance, thereby 'creating an emotional vacuum' (Iwaniec 2003: 52) so the child becomes lonely and social isolated. Another response is for a parent to angrily lash out at a child, causing them to feel upset, confused and scared. A common expression of emotional abuse is verbal aggression (Donovan and Brassard 2011). This is mainly described as a kind of spurning behaviour, although it crosses over into the category of terrorising. This includes 'name-calling, threats, intimidation, and frightening or humiliating the person' (Davis 1996). This kind of verbal attack may result in a range of detrimental effects on the child. They may internalise their distress (such as by feeling guilty or unlovable, becoming depressed, or harming themselves), or externalise it (for example, by becoming 'naughtier', or behaving aggressively) (Daniel et al. 2010). This in turn affects their development, the attachments they form, and it diminishes their ability to form positive relationships with others. Their capacity to develop strong self-esteem and self-confidence may diminish.

The risks of harm may be further increased in situations where one sibling is singled out for abuse, whilst others remain non-abused. Family dynamics become more complex, possibly with a child who witnesses and takes part in the abuse of another. It is possible that a non-abused child may demonstrate 'empathy deficits' (Hollingsworth et al. 2008: 70), motivated by the need to protect themselves from the effects of witnessing and colluding in their sibling's abuse. There may be various outcomes for the non-abused child, who may develop unbalanced

expectations of relationships. They may experience difficulties in reconciling why they have not been chosen for abuse, perhaps placing a high level of importance on their ability to perform well and please others. This kind of family system may have consequences for how they experience relationships later in life; they may perhaps pursue relationships where one partner or family member receives less warmth and empathy than another. Social workers who are assessing for the damaging nature of a family system have to consider the impact of sibling abuse on a non-abused child.

Parents who abuse their children may be in a state of denial about the extent of their harmful behaviour. Mothers who have been identified as depressed and isolated may deny that they are unsympathetic to their children's needs (Rushton and Dance 2005). This reluctance to acknowledge the harm increases the impact on the child (Rushton and Dance 2005), as they are resistant or uncommitted to changing their way they interact with their child. It can be complicated for a social worker to identify the extent to which a parent has the capacity, or will, to change their behaviour, as parents may exhibit passive compliance to the requests of social workers. They may agree to make changes whilst continuing their behaviour in private, or comply for a short period of time in order to curtail social service involvement. Research indicates that in a study, ten out of twenty-seven mothers were resistant to the assessment process and unmotivated to accept help. When parents are not amenable to change, the cycle of abuse may become increasingly entrenched in family life and progressively more difficult for family members to acknowledge. In a statutory social work context a 'highly significant association' (Glaser and Prior 1997: 321) has been found between parental acknowledgement of their own difficulties in parenting their child and the child remaining at home.

### Impacts and outcomes of emotional abuse

The impact and outcomes of emotional abuse cannot be easily separated from one another (Hart and Brassard 1987); immediate and long-term consequences are interwoven. In addition to this, trajectories that occur as a result of emotional abuse are an area that requires further research (Shaffer et al 2009). Behavioural problems that may be more clearly observed early on in childhood as a

consequence of emotional abuse include lying, stealing, failure to thrive, suicide attempts, and aggression (Hart and Brassard 1987:161). Following more chronic exposure to emotional abuse a social worker may consider that a child is at greater risk of having poor self-esteem, and respond defensively during interactions with others. Experiences of emotional abuse may lead to feelings of mistrust, detachment and resentment. Consequently difficulties may be encountered in forming intimate relationships both in childhood and later on in life (Iwaniec 1995). Childhood experiences are woven into adult behaviour, and it is common for adults to still be dealing with 'troubling residues from their families of origin' as well as problems with current relationships (Sable 1999).

The experiences a child may have as a consequence of emotional abuse may not be easily observed, but evidence of their feelings may be rendered more detectable through an understanding of what they might constitute. The overwhelming terror, for example, that emotional abuse can provoke for a young child has been compared to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Sable 1999: 53). Young children do not have the cognitive ability to assess the extent of the danger they are experiencing. They may believe that harm or death is imminent, and are, therefore, particularly vulnerable to post-traumatic stress reactions. The results of experiencing different forms of emotional abuse produce varying harmful outcomes. Witnessing domestic violence, for example affects a child's coping abilities and behaviours (Iwaniec 1997). Children who witness domestic violence are at greatest risk of injury, eating disorders and self-harm (World Health Organisation 2002). Girls are more often associated with developing self-harming behaviours, eating disorders and becoming the victims of domestic violence themselves. Both boys and girls are more likely to experience impairment to cognitive and sensory growth, and exposure to social violence (Barlow and Schrader-McMillan 2010: 29).

A child's potential to maltreat other children increases as an outcome of emotional abuse (Garbarino 2011). Children who are abused may be characterised by the way they 'map' social information, such as ignoring positive social cues and displaying a 'narrow repertoire of aggressive responses' (Garbarino 2011: 799) towards other children. 'Singling out' occurs when one child is scapegoated as a focus for difficulties in a family system (Ruston and Dance 2005) and is addressed in greater detail in a later section, which looks at parental attributes. Singling out of



a child for abuse has been identified as also harmful to non-abused siblings. In cases where risk has been identified for a singled out 'index' child, most siblings were found to receive varying types of emotional abuse too (Hamilton-Giachritsis and Browne 2005). They may join in blaming the victim for problems in the family, or blame them for other forms of abuse that are occurring in the family unit. Witnessing or participating in this scapegoating behaviour may produce a range of traits in siblings, such as an empathy deficit, insensitivity and distorted view of relationships (Hollingsworth et al. 2008). Sibling relationships are the template for all lateral relationships (Hollway 2006a: 27) which means that non-abused children may go on to engage in relationships in other areas of their life which follow a similar pattern of behaviour. The risks of emotional abuse increases as children get older (Hart et al. 1997). Children may become more autonomous and oppositional to their parents behaviour. They may evolve to become emotionally withdrawn from their parents or develop a 'defensive' independence from them (Iwaniec 2003).

Positive, warm, and responsive parenting supports and promotes a child's capacity for 'self-regulation', whereas negative, harsh, and insensitive parenting has detrimental effects (Kochanska 2005). Regulation of feelings is an important aspect of early personality development. 'Emotion regulation' is the ability to 'modulate or control the intensity and expression of feelings and impulses' (Wolfe and McIsaac 2011: 805). It is particularly important for children to develop their ability to do this, so when they experience intense emotions they are able to adjust to manage their experience of intense states. This has crucial implications for the future development of personality attributes such as a 'strong conscience', which can be demonstrated by an ability to prioritise 'pro-social values over selfish concerns' (Kochanska 2005: 28). The exploration of 'child mutually responsive orientation' (MRO) indicates that children who enjoy interactions with their caregivers develop strong consciences (Kochanska 2005), engaging in 'good' behaviour as a source of positive emotions. Less self-regulation and socially conscious behaviours, conversely occur in unresponsive relationships (low MRO).

Deficient self-regulation is more likely to occur in children who are prone to negative emotionality (Kochanska 2005). The psychological literature posits that some children may possess the potential to be genetically predisposed to high negativity. The brain's neurotransmitters are under the control of an enzyme linked

to a specific gene (monoamine oxidase A—the MAOA gene). Research in the area has indicated that children who are abused and, for example, have the ‘MAOA gene turned off’ (Garbarino 2011: 800) may have a reduced ability to cope with stressful situations. An insensitive caregiver whose child’s behaviour seems to be exaggerated in its anxious or aggressive responses, may further diminish their parental capacity for tolerance and empathy of the child. The overall disharmonious quality of a relationship provides an environment for a child to become more disturbed and experience ‘distorted personality development’ (Sable 1999), which increases the potential for more abuse.

Previous reviews of literature, which explore the evidence in relation to emotional abuse, indicate increased risks of mental health problems in adult life (Daniel, Taylor and Scott 2011), including anxiety and depression (Barlow and Schrader-MacMillan 2009) and eating disorders (Witkiewitz and Dodge-Reyome 2001). Emotional abuse can have a long-lasting negative impact upon children’s health and development with ‘significantly higher levels of posttraumatic stress, depression, anxiety, and anger’ (Chirichella-Besemer and Motta, 2008: 442). Low self-esteem is severe and prevalent in emotionally abused children. It can manifest in low self-efficacy and a negative view of oneself as likable and appreciated. It may become evident in interactions in relationships with others, and in how a person relates to their own children when they have them (Iwaniec 2000).

Even when the child's physical needs are being met, emotional abuse exerts a destructive influence on a child’s development (Hart and Brassard 1987: 161). It is increasingly apparent that emotional abuse may result in poor physical as well as emotional and psychological outcomes. Research in the last 20 years has demonstrated a causal link between emotional disturbances such as maternal deprivation and developmental issues such as growth failure (Iwaniec 2003). Sustained and severe emotional abuse affects the rate of a child’s ‘linear growth and functioning of the secretion of growth hormones’ (Iwaniec 2003: 53). Chronic lack of positive social interactions results in lack of use, which in the brains leads to the equivalent effect of wasted muscle; it must be used in order to develop (Gerhardt 2004).

Parental rejection during infancy has adverse effects on a child’s development (Rushton and Dance 2005; Garbarino 2011). It has been associated with feeding,

sleeping and general regularity problems and non-organic failure to thrive (Rushton and Dance 2005: 414-415). Failure-to-grow mechanisms are complex and still not clear. Emotional disturbances lead to undernourishment through under-eating and refusal of food. In addition to this, emotional abuse also effects 'intermediary metabolism so as to interfere with anabolic processes' (Iwaniec 2003: 38). 'Chronic grief' can be a cause of secondary hormonal insufficiency, which can lead to dwarfism or failure to thrive (McGee and Wolfe 1991; Iwaniec 1996), the characteristics of which include short stature and low body weight. However, it is important to note that some research indicates that it is a misconception that the developing infant brain is a 'uniquely fragile object' (Wastell and White 2012: 409), and it is possible for brains to develop and recover. Cognitive and physical development can rectify the effects of previous harm, and the brain is capable of adapting to resist it.

### Signs of emotional abuse

The NICE guidelines (2009) take a broad but comprehensive approach to when to suspect the signs of child maltreatment section (1.4). It is an extensive and detailed list of possible displays of behaviour that may indicate a child's distressed state of mind. Signs range from having nightmares to coercive controlling behaviour. Many of the signs could apply to a range of abuse or causes, and in a social work context the NICE guidelines function as a useful checklist, but do not focus in on the nuances of the potential consequences of emotional abuse.

The signs and symptoms of emotional abuse are not always immediately visible. Identifying emotional abuse and assessing levels of harm is often harder to do than with other forms of abuse, as the signs are less transparent or tangible (Smith Slep et al. 2011). Not all of what a child is feeling and experiencing will be apparent to others. Allegations of physical abuse, by contrast, can be substantiated by injuries caused non-accidentally and/or with discrepant explanations; disclosures of sexual abuse may be supported by forensic evidence gained through medical examination; neglect may be demonstrated by developmental delays, poor hygiene and an unkempt appearance (Glaser 2002; Iwaniec 2003; Sheehan 2006).

The CA89 and related social work policy encourage social workers to identify individual kinds of abuse so it may be addressed as an unambiguous category. It is important to emphasise that emotional abuse regularly progresses alongside other forms of abuse. It is often the case that children who are identified as being physically abused or neglected are not recognised as experiencing emotional abuse (Glaser 2002). The harmful nature of a parent-child relationship may lead to more tangible indicators of abuse. Emotional abuse interacts with and exacerbates the effects of other kinds of abuse. Its occurrence increases with environmental factors such as poverty, and inadequate provision of medical and educational services (Doyle 1996). Although it is important to note that although there may be a 'partial correlation between disadvantage and poor parenting', there is not a 'causal link' between the two (Narey 2014: 11).

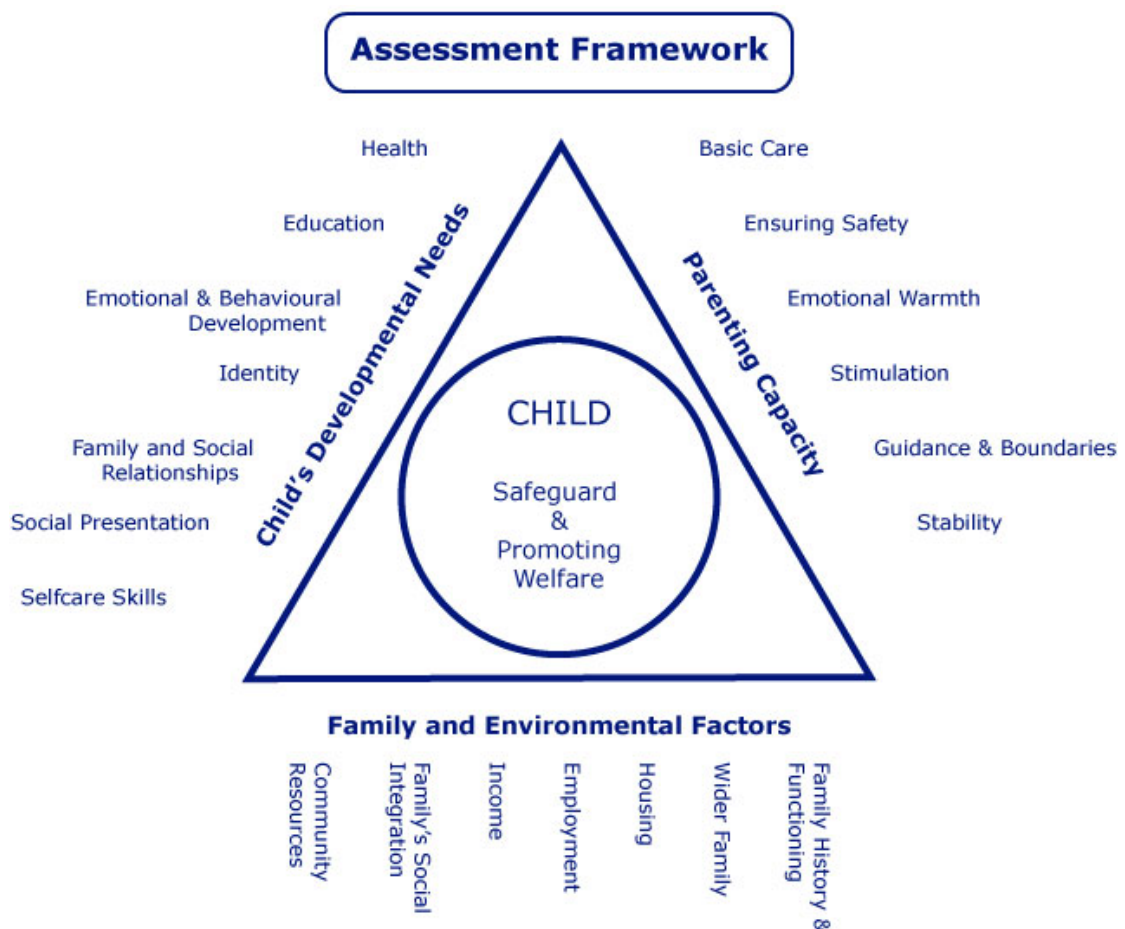
In the absence of unambiguous evidence about the nature of harm and how it has been caused, the professional system may be unsure how to proceed. Many such cases are not sufficiently 'high risk' in the scheme of child protection thresholds to do more than make for continued offers of support and monitoring (Glaser 2002; Iwaniec 2003; Smith Slep et al. 2011). Such cases are prone to slipping below the social worker's 'radar'. They know the case is troubling but believe little more can be done. Becoming preoccupied with more immediate matters; for example obtaining a court order for children for whom abuse is more certain, becomes a priority (O'Hagan 1995; Iwaniec et al. 2007).

## PRACTICE TOOLS FOR IDENTIFYING AND WORKING WITH EMOTIONAL ABUSE

There are various tools available to assist social workers in deciding if they are working with emotional abuse. The 'Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and Their Families' (see figure 1) was introduced to social services to guide practitioners in identifying aspects of the three key domains: children's needs, parenting capacity and wider environment, that are required to safeguard and promote the welfare of a child. This assessment framework indicates that many of these factors are located in the emotional relationship between a child and their parent. A child's needs include 'family and social relationships' and a parent's

capacity involves 'emotional warmth'. This framework is most commonly used in English social work practice, although there are various other frameworks to guide work with child emotional abuse, including parenting assessments notably by Reder, Duncan and Gray 1993, and diagnostics of parental behaviour set out by APSAC (1995).

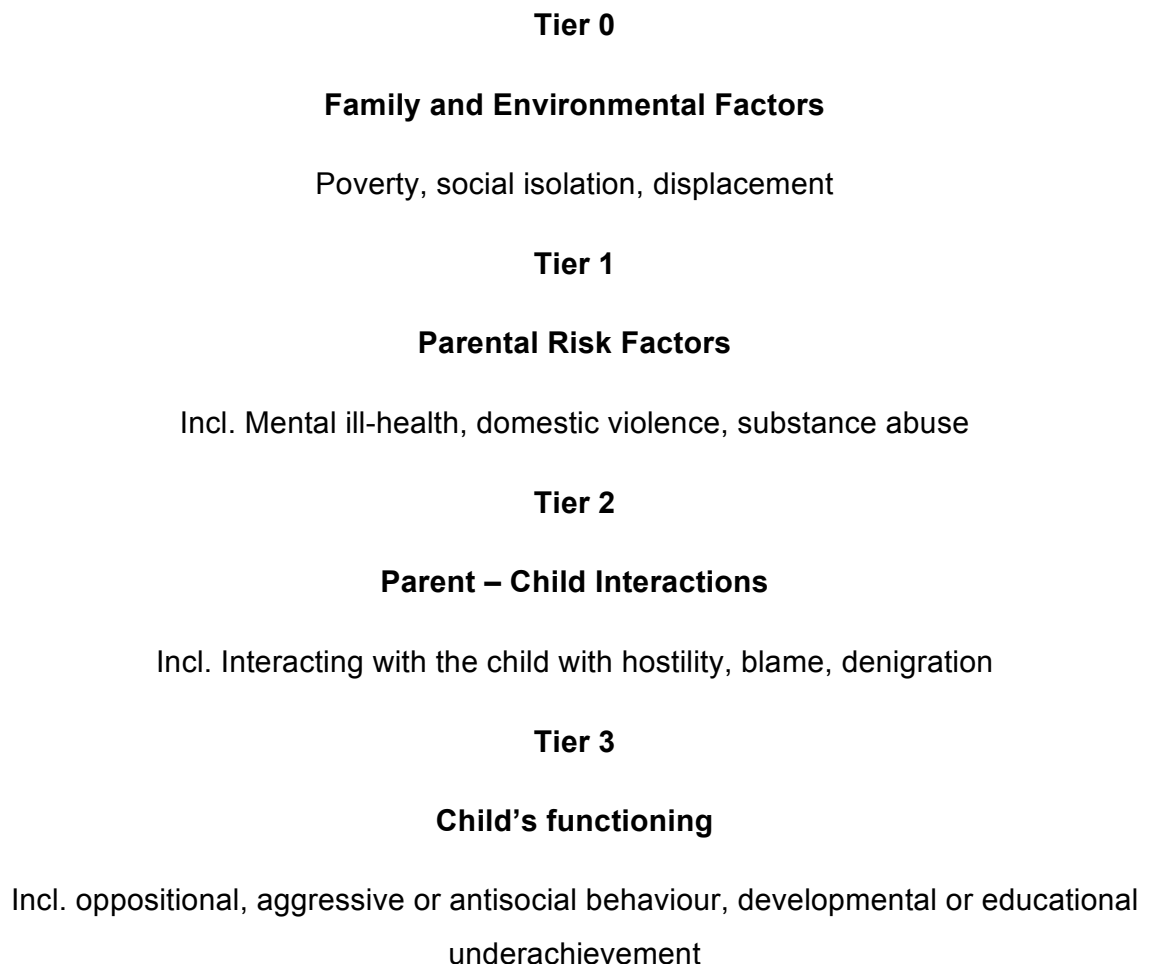
**Figure 1:** The 'Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and Their Families' (Department of Health/Department of Education and Employment/Home Office, 2000)



Glaser's conceptual 4-Tier FRAMEA model (2011) (see figure 2) is based on an ecological systems model, which relates specifically to emotional abuse. It encapsulates the various contributing factors that make up an emotionally abusive case and has proven to be useful during trials with social workers (Glaser et al.

2012). The model is helpful in training situations, as if a worker is able to clearly identify the family background, the parental issues, the parents' interaction with their child and the consequences emerging for that child's functioning, a fuller picture of emotional abuse concerns may be appraised. Although it can provide greater clarity for the broader circumstances that may prompt an intervention, the limitations of this model is that it does not attend to the nuances of relationships which lead to emotional harm.

**Figure 2:** Adapted from Glaser et al. (2012) 4-Tier FRAMEA model



One approach that is widely taught to student social workers is the use of attachment theory to establish whether a relationship between a parent and a child is flawed or damaged. The Child Attachment Interview (CAI) was developed in an attempt to 'complement existing attachment measures' (Target et al. 2003: 172), as outlined earlier defined by Ainsworth's original strange situation experiment. It is a more complex and in-depth assessment of child-parent relationships. At the time of writing this thesis, practitioners are able to attend a training course and receive accreditation to assess the quality of parent-child relations as evidence in court. However, the measures used in a CAI are expensive, time consuming, require significant training and complex equipment to implement. They must be 'used as developed' (Lee et al. 2011: 233) in order to make categorisations. Owing to the constraints related to using such a tool, the CAI has not yet been validated in the context of child protection social work in legal settings. It could, however, be regarded as a step towards offering a more systemised application of attachment theory.

Another approach a social worker may take in relation to attachment work is to ask a parent to remember their own childhood experiences (Iwaniec 1995) through the use of assessments tools, perhaps drawing on approaches the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) (Sable 1999). In doing this, a parent may recall the way in which their own parents established attachments patterns with them, and reflect on how these patterns impact on their relationships and current parenting.

Checklists, such as the 'CAADA-DASH Risk Identification Checklist', (CAADA 2014) offer a useful way of gathering and verifying important information in a consistent way, particularly around domestic violence and negative parental behaviours. However, they cannot always capture complex and nuanced effects on the child's emotional wellbeing and psychological development that differ from the usual signs of abuse. Assessment tools alone cannot always accurately measure the signs and symptoms of a child being emotionally abused.

### *Interventions*

Child protection procedures begin by establishing if a concern that has been raised requires an immediate safeguarding response. In cases of emotional abuse, lack of

clarity around what constitutes an emotionally abusive interaction often results in a delay in deciding on the severity of the harm. In addition to this, the risk of harm by emotional abuse is not often considered urgent by the current system and children are rarely removed from their homes in situations designated purely as emotionally abusive. Statutory social work has time limitations, which are self-imposed by local authorities to ensure concerns for a child's wellbeing are being met in a timely way. This can be problematic when addressing emotional abuse cases, which may require longer periods of time to be worked with.

Although it is appropriate to intervene with emotional abuse within the child protection arena, it is not necessarily amenable to current child protection procedures with their 'connotations of immediacy' (Glaser and Prior 1997: 323). In cases of emotional abuse child protection registration is a 'last resort' (Glaser and Prior 1997) and it is more often addressed without the formalities of registration and legal action. Following Munro's investigation into child protection practice, there is an acknowledgement that these limitations should be more flexibly applied in order to promote a 'stronger awareness of balancing the timelines with the quality of assessment' (Munro 2011: 11).

There is an additional concern in cases of emotional abuse, and particularly emotional neglect, that professionals working with families for long periods of time can become accustomed to, and normalise, the fluctuations in parental behaviour. If it regularly dips above and below the thresholds for intervention, social workers can consequently find it difficult to decide exactly where the thresholds lie (Brown and Ward 2012). Recent research into child protection services calls for 'more open debate concerning appropriate thresholds for intervention' (Brown and Ward 2014: 266). This research aims to make a contribution to this debate through encouraging social workers to freely share their accounts with about these areas of practice.

As discussed earlier, providing evidence to satisfy the thresholds for legal interventions in the case of emotional abuse can be quite complex and intimidating for social workers. They often feel they do not have the skills required to work in a legal setting. Legal interventions into emotional abuse require the building of sufficient evidence to satisfy a judge that the removal of the child is the best decision. In the most extreme cases, where evidence of emotional abuse is deemed adequate and where parents are unresponsive to support and



interventions, a court may decide that protection for the child can only be achieved by separation. Long-term risks where assessment indicates serious maltreatment may result in compulsory removal from the home. Removal from the family home must be carried out in a court setting using CA89 legislation. If a court is satisfied that a child is at significant harm, or likelihood of it, they meet the Sec. 31 threshold criteria for the 'compulsory intervention machinery' of a care order (Allen 1998: 119). A child may then be given the opportunity to accelerate their development through the gradual establishment of a more secure attachment to new care-givers (Iwaniec 1995: 67). In situations where a parent rejects a child, their behaviours are considered hostile and the possibility of change is unlikely (Iwaniec 2003) a child may be considered for adoption.

In day-to-day work it is often, however, at the point of assessment of emotional abuse that a social worker decides how best to work with a family to prevent further harm. Emotionally abused children may not exhibit any clear signs of harm. Much of the harm caused in these cases may not be so easily detected at the point of assessment. Owing to the 'asymptomatic condition of some children, the nature may be difficult to discern' (Barlow and Schrader McMillan 2010: 112). For the child concerned, issues may emerge later on in life, perhaps in subsequent relationships. Picking up on the presence of emotional abuse and successfully addressing it may depend upon the capacity of the individual social worker. The social worker recognises its presence and then works closely with the child and family to reduce the risk of it. However, even with this approach 'it is virtually impossible to supervise effectively a relationship which is characterised by its harmful nature' (Glaser and Prior 1997: 323).

It is possible that a parent who has suffered abuse during their own lives may temporarily lose the capacity to attune to their child when they are faced with a reminder of their own difficult past. A parent may become emotionally unavailable to the child, which can impact negatively on the child and family dynamics. Parents may, for example, 'anxiously load' their child with their own anxious preoccupations (Fonagy and Allison 2012: 25). Parents may be helped by their social worker to attune to their child and identify with their needs through 'mentalization'. (Fonagy and Allison 2012). Mentalization is when a parent is able to recognise and think about their own emotional state, and thus the emotional state of others. Derived

from theories including those of Freud, Bion and Winnicott, mentalization is a way of conceptualising child development and attachment through the life span. It is considered to be a building block of empathy. An inability to mentalize has been linked to emotional disorders (Barlow and Schrader-Macmillan 2009).

Although the evidence of the effectiveness of 'mentalization-based' interventions is still limited (Barlow and Schrader-Macmillan 2009), encouraging a parent's capacity to mentalize may be a step towards them being able to empathise more readily with their child's emotional state. A social worker may incorporate such interventions in their work, taking an empathetic and curious stance to support the parent in gaining deeper insights into their own mental state. By increasing a parent's capacity to contain their own difficult experiences, they may become equipped to regulate their emotions and recognise the hurt and suffering in their child. The desired outcome is that the parent will develop their capacity to mentalize sufficiently so they are able to respond to, and attend to the needs of their children better. In turn, a child may also learn to mentalize from experiencing their parents' effective emotional regulation and ability to empathise.

There are a number of additional therapeutic tools available to social workers that focus on encouraging parental change. These include motivational interviewing (MI) (Munro 2011; Barlow with Scott 2010) and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) (Iwaniec 1995). These are systems of counselling which involve the social worker talking with clients to encourage them to change the way they process information. This may help them address difficulties in task-orientated ways so that they may learn to function in situations of adversity more effectively. For example, minimising client resistance and eliciting 'change talk' (Forrester et al. 2012: 125) in MI may help a parents to recognise a problem exists, and to build confidence in addressing it. CBT promotes a parent's ability to mentalize, as it 'welcomes' in or 'allows' difficult thoughts, so that attention may be moved from the content of them to the actual process of how they unfold (Allen 2008). Parental engagement with these approaches may support the development of self-awareness of behaviours, with the intention of modifying them. Parents may be encouraged to make sense of their unhelpful responses to their child (Sable 1999) and change them.

Reduced harm may be achieved through practical means such as additional practical support for parents, for example the provision of day care. Methods

focusing on work with the child tend to focus on the building of resilience. Research indicates that 'resilience-based' intervention can impact favourably on a child's emotional functioning. In a review of studies about resilience-based interventions by Brownlee et al. (2013), common focuses for development included personal competency, coping strategies, social competency, pro-social involvement and cultural identity. Personal competency is conceptualised as an internal state characterized by aspects such as beliefs and values that contribute to perceptions of the self, the wider world, and the future (Brownlee et al. 2013). 'Self-protection' involves the teaching of resilience skills to children, which enables them to develop self-supporting mechanisms. Learning how to identify reliable safe adults in their lives may enable them to deal with adversity at home more effectively (Hart et al. 2007).

Where child protection social workers assess that more in-depth therapeutic support and interventions are required, they may implement systemic family therapies. These can be effective method to addressing specific issues related to emotional abuse such as child conduct disorders and eating disorders (Barlow and Schrader McMillan 2010). Systemic family therapy can focus less in the first instance on the specific failings on the parent and more on addressing the presenting behavioural issues of the child. A disadvantage to this approach is that it may mean that a parent does not acknowledge their role in the abuse, with the child remaining 'the problem'. Working with families where parents are resistant to acknowledging emotionally abusive behaviour requires professional sensitivity during the early stages of intervention. Mental health professionals speak metaphorically of 'treading a fine line' or 'walking a tightrope' (Rushton and Dance 2005: 422) so as not to be seen by the child to be accepting the parents' negative view, but also not challenging parental negativity too abruptly at the risk of alienating them. It is important to acknowledge that therapeutic approaches to addressing abuse often involve lots of verbal self-expression and regular engagement. Parents with issues such as learning difficulties or substance misuse problems can encounter this as challenging to sustain, particularly under pressure of child protection investigations.

Much more information is required about the effectiveness of specific interventions with emotional abuse (Smith-Slep et al. 2011). Barlow and Schrader McMillan

(2010) produced a 'what works' guide to the prevention of occurrence and recurrence of emotional abuse, collating evidence published since 1990 about what works in preventing the occurrence and recurrence of emotional abuse. They concluded that:

*'despite extensive searching and contact with a wide range of experts in the field, we were only able to identify a small number of methods working with this group of families that had been tested rigorously' (117).*

Interventions with emotional abuse are arguably more complex than intervening with other kinds of abuse because it is a multifaceted phenomenon and likely to be the result of a combination of harmful parenting behaviours. Social workers often attempt to engage parents to address their problems at the same time as assessing their parenting for improvements. This is a challenging task, which may require a multidisciplinary approach co-ordinated by a social worker. There is still limited research available about parental capacity for change and the timeframes required for change to occur (Brown and Ward 2014), so gauging the extent of progress is an additional complication. Assessment for effectiveness of interventions with the parents and the improving condition of the child occurs through 'triangulation', whereby more than one method is used to address the emotional abuse of the child. There is a risk that where evidence gathering may take a long time, any potential improvements that might be made for a child may be 'postponed while professionals wait fruitlessly for parents to change' (Brown and Ward 2014: 266).

However, key information about interventions with emotional abuse is that it takes different forms and approaches depending on individual needs and the exact nature and severity of the emotional abuse (Iwanic 1995). The nature of emotional abuse interventions relate to the assessment a professional has made of a situation and the action taken depends on the gravity of the case (Iwaniec 2006). Current and effective social work responses to the identification of emotional abuse are better described as 'working *towards* protection' (Glaser and Prior 1997: 329). A goal of social work practice with emotional abuse is to be able to intervene via population-based approaches 'before it occurs' (Barlow and Schrader-McMillan 2010:118). Preventative work with emotional abuse occurs most successfully, and reduces the occurrence of other forms of abuse, when all *routine* contact between

professionals and parents are used as an opportunity to promote sensitive and attuned parenting (Barlow and Schrader-McMillan 2010: 119).

Overall, research regarding interventions with emotional abuse indicates that effective social work practice that achieves change favours close partnership work with the family. The 'professional-client relationship is a pivotal part of the change process' (Barlow and Scott 2010: 60). The extent to which a social worker is able to incorporate their evidenced based practice knowledge and use their intuition, along with their ability to build relationships will impact significantly on the progress that is made. Good interpersonal relations between social workers and families (Barlow and Schrader-Macmillan 2009), along with supervision of parent and child interaction can sometimes prompt change. Relationships built between social workers and families may facilitate changes in behaviour that reduce the harm of emotional abuse. It is the nuances of these interactions that are of particular interest to this research.

## THE ROLE ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE PLAYS IN WORK WITH EMOTIONAL ABUSE

Culture is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon (Thompson et al. 1996). It is essentially 'shared ways of seeing, thinking and doing' (Thompson et al. 1996: 647). The greatest source of stress for professionals in a child protection setting is a work culture where normative emotional responses to work are pathologised (Morrison 1997: 206). There is a range of possible emotional responses a social worker may experience when struggling to deal with child protection work. Shame and guilt, for example, may be felt in response to an urge to escape from an intimidating parent. Social workers may engage in unhelpful methods of problem-solving that occur in negative organisational cultures, such as 'anxiety avoidance' (Thompson et al. 1996: 651), for example, using the excuse of being too busy to follow up on work that is particularly stressful for them.

Social workers may feel additionally ashamed, guilt-ridden and alone in the knowledge that it is their job to stay and deal with a difficult situation, but that they are compelled to avoid it. These unpleasant feelings may be compounded by the awareness that they will be held accountable for how they managed it, or worse still,

how they avoided a distressing situation it altogether. Rather than admitting to their colleagues and managers the layers of emotions they are experiencing in reaction to their work, professionals can become victims of 'professional accommodation' where they sequentially hide, delay disclosing information or retract it because it is associated with their fears, sense of helplessness and feelings of entrapment (Morrison 1997: 203-5).

In high pressure environments where lack of resources, volume of work, client needs and working conditions mean that there are few opportunities to 'meet or neutralize the strain' (Jones et al. 1991: 444), 'burnout' and low morale is common. Research indicates that although social workers find their jobs satisfying, they perceived the work to be so pressured as to adversely affect the level of service they can provide; when 'job demands are high and control is low' psychological strain occurs (Jones et al. 1991 443-45). Unmanaged anxiety and lack of emotional containment (Ruch 2005a) within an organisational culture presents increased pressures, thereby heightening risk factors.

### Supervision

In this section I will be referring to the notion of 'supervision', which in statutory child protection work is the regular managerial task of providing social workers with a one-to-one time limited support space. Frequently cited definitions suggest the three interrelated functions of supervision are: administrative, educational, and supportive (Bogo 2006: 51). In modern statutory social work practice supervision tends to lean towards prioritising the administrative function with the intention of providing accountability. In essence 'workers are hired by an agency to do a job and supervisors oversee that the job is done well' (Bogo 2006: 50). Research relating to supervision of statutory social workers consequently indicates it currently has a tendency to focus on 'surveillance rather than support' (Ruch 2007: 372) and does not offer the conditions required to promote emotionally skilled practice. Opportunities to embrace 'respectful uncertainty' and 'healthy scepticism' (Ruch 2007), tend to be lost for reasons including insufficient time, with opportunistic 'corridor conversations' taking the place of 'depth' case discussion forums.

A previous review of the literature identifies 'high quality supervision and building reflective capacity' as key to producing non-proceduralised, relationship-based responses to families when working with 'uncertainty, risk and complexity' (Jones 2011: 1). Research indicates that social workers tend to receive different types of supervision which changes according to level of experience; moving from case direction in the early years following qualification, to a focus on social workers developing their own decision-making processes as they become more proficient (Turner-Daly and Jack: 2014). Amongst the styles of supervision social workers experience as unhelpful are a 'tick-box' approach that focuses on processes and timescales. Irregular, unreliable or rushed sessions with lack of opportunities for open discussion were described as counterproductive. Supervisors who act in an oppressive manner with entrenched views and who control the agenda were disliked (Turner-Daly and Jack: 2014). Helpful supervisors were conversely described as approachable, open and flexible. Social workers reported preferring relaxed and supportive sessions that promote reflection and offer clear guidance when required. Supervisors who show genuine concern for the social worker and promote professional development were regarded as more helpful (Turner-Daly and Jack: 2014).

The quality of supervision that social workers receive plays an important role in their ability to manage the stresses of the job. In research with social workers in relation to work-related pressures they raised issues including being too anxious to sleep at night, and believing their skills were inadequate to help the children and families they work with (Harvey 2010). They reported feeling relieved by talking, and reassured by having the opportunity to discuss 'the limits and boundaries around the work' (Harvey 2010: 142). This allowed them to examine and contain the huge sense of responsibility they felt for the families they worked with. Lack of supervisory support has related (in mixed methods studies) to high scores for anxiety and depression (Jones et al 1991: 467). Munro's report (2010) calls for an end to 'ineffective defensive practices' (Lees et al. 2013: 553), and better containment for social workers.

A 'containing' environment offers practitioners supportive space to consider the different skills and types of knowledge they might utilise to address the complexity of each practice encounter. As outlined earlier in the literature review Bion (1967)

developed the concepts of 'contained-container', to describe a functioning relationship between a parent and child. This mechanism can occur in adult relationships, both in individual and collective contexts. In therapeutic relationships the therapist can act as containers for the client's unmanageable feelings (Ruch 2005a: 662). The principles of containment theory can be applied to support between individuals in organisations, such as social work.

Social workers operate in contexts that are uncertain and unpredictable. They require settings which offer 'holistic containment' (Ruch 2005a: 660) in order to reflect and respond effectively to these challenges. All social workers, regardless of their level of experience or competence, require external support mechanisms to 'check out' that they are processing difficult emotions in a way that consistently ensures the best possible outcomes for the children and families they work with. A 'containing' environment may support social workers in their day-to-day work. Menzies Lyth (1998) demonstrated how the absence of effective containment of anxiety in the organisation of a nursing service led to a collection of defensive techniques including depersonalisation of patients, and denial and detachment from difficult emotions.

Supervisors offer social workers a regular safe space to process challenging emotional responses to practice. The importance of embedding concepts such as 'containment of the container' (Barlow with Scott 2010: 71) within supervisory relationships is recognised as necessary at an organisational level. The supervisor functions as a container for the social worker, offering support in managing difficult feelings towards something that a social worker can gradually internalise and manage with their own resources. In work with emotional abuse, it is required of supervisors to receive 'projections' (for example, anger directed at a supervisor by a worker originated from the worker's frustrations at a parent's behaviour). In doing this, the supervisor may 'effectively re-project these into the worker to enable them to develop their internal container' (Barlow with Scott 2010: 71) so they may deal with their anxieties more effectively, and consequently feel less overwhelmed.

Peer supervision relationships derived from Bion's model of a 'commensal relationship' (Barlow with Scott 2010) are also suggested as a means by which workers support one another 'with both parties benefitting from mutual containment' (71). However, although the importance of the relationship between reflective



practice and social work is acknowledged, the organisational emphasis of social work practice on eliminating risk and internal resistance on the part of practitioners to engage in thinking about difficult and emotionally complex work (Ruch 2005a) means that the implementation of reflective practice is not always as effective as it could be.

Workers who lose their reflective capacity become less attuned to the needs of the child and consequently do not address child protection issues as effectively as they could do. They need their own resilience to 'inoculate' them against the difficulties of practice. Emotional resilience in a social work setting is not only as the capacity to deal with challenging situations and bounce back from difficult experiences. It is also the ability to question one's own responses and ensure anti-oppressive practice (Grant 2014b). Morrison suggests that it is preferable to recruit social workers with high levels of emotional self-efficacy and who have 'positive coping strategies and personal resilience' (Morrison 2007: 258). Workers also need to be supported in managing long-term difficult feelings by their workplace, and without the resources to develop and maintain these characteristics social workers are liable to experience 'pathogenic reactions such as physical illness, compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma and burnout' (Grant 2014b: 3).

*'If the work environment does not help support workers and debrief them after particularly traumatic experiences, then it increases the risk of burnout' (Munro 2011: 38).*

Research indicates that it is 'vital that practitioners have spaces where they can safely address the anxieties and uncertainties they face in their practice (Ruch 2007: 664).

## CHAPTER CONCLUSION

The literature indicates that there is not one agreed definition of emotional abuse, and what is considered to constitute it in the literature varies. This makes it difficult for social workers to confidently recognise the role it plays in an abusive situation. There are a number of parental behaviours that may be considered to be emotionally abusive but as many may be close to normative parenting, measuring when it becomes a cause for concern is problematic, particularly as much of the

harm it causes is accumulative and may not be evident until later in life. Emotional abusive is often part of a family system, woven into relationships and repeated through the generations. It tends to be found alongside other forms of abuse and is regarded as less serious because its harm is not always immediate and visible.

Assessment models are available to support social workers in the identification of emotional abuse, and approaches such as attachment theory are often utilised to explain the dynamics of harmful relationships. However, in spite of increasing knowledge and a growing appreciation of the harm of emotional abuse, it is difficult to justify taking action where harm is apparent. The legal system prefers visible and immediate harm as reason to intervene in family life, but social workers struggle with providing evidence of it. In addition to this, a case of emotional abuse can take time and considerable social work involvement to build.

The literature review has summarised research into some key approaches social workers use to operationalize their skills and knowledge in relation to work with emotional abuse. The literature available has discussed child protection tasks more broadly, and indicated that where early intervention is a possibility, the incorporation of approaches which promote parental capacity for reflexivity are an effective means of addressing emotional abuse cases. It suggests that the most effective interventions occur through building communicative relationships with families and children where parents are open to developing a reflective stance to behaviour change. The research suggests that social workers also need support in managing their own emotional processes, and the importance of a supportive working environment has been raised as crucial.

There is very little research, however, that looks at the processes social workers engage with when they go about daily work with emotional abuse, and how they manage these tasks. An in-depth study of the role social workers' cultural, personal and subjective selves play in the approach to assessing and intervening with situations of emotional abuse may contribute to more consolidated knowledge about how emotional abuse is defined assessed and evidenced. A deeper understanding how social workers receive support in carrying out their work is of particular interest. The literature suggests that cumulatively, work with emotional abuse carries a broad array of additional challenges. Most prevalent of these

challenges is perhaps the additional emotional labour associated with addressing harm which occurs prevalently in the psychosocial domain.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the ontological and epistemological basis for the research before setting out the more practical process of how the data was gathered and analysed. In the first section of this chapter the research questions are set out, with an explanation of how they aim to fill some of the gaps in the available knowledge about assessment and work with emotional abuse. This is followed by an explanation of my theoretical approach, which has a critical realist framework. The research methods have been informed by a psychosocial approach with the aspiration of gaining deeper insight into social worker practices with emotional abuse. The central psychosocial process of the 'defended participant' and the 'defended researcher', which has been utilised during data collection and analysis, is discussed. This is followed by an explanation of the methods employed, looking in particular at use of focus groups and one-to-one interviews. Along with this, attention is paid to how plans to carry out the data collection were required to evolve in order to adjust to the circumstances of the research field. Towards the end of the chapter attention is paid to the inextricable presence of the researcher within psychosocial research. The importance of acknowledging my own research positioning is discussed. Finally, ethical concerns are considered, particularly in relation to the implications of exploring social work using psychosocial methods. Within this the process of gaining ethical approval and the steps taken to protect the identities of participants and the families are discussed.

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Contemporary social work practice is characterised 'by its social focus and perspective' (Preston-Shoot and Agass 1990:15). This research is designed to reflect these qualities, with a commitment to understanding the very human nature of the work and the people that it concerns. This study has been designed to be a small qualitative project with an exploratory approach to finding out more about the subject of work with emotional abuse. The aim has not been to find specific,

quantifiable answers to questions about effective work, nor is it an attempt to measure, for example, how successful social workers are at work with emotional abuse. It has been more of an exploration of the issues that impact on the ways in which individual social workers work with emotional abuse. Inevitably, as depth answers to questions were sought, the research questions changed over the course of the research process. In reviewing the literature and gathering data, a methodological approach that is flexible yet also satisfactorily structured as to retain focus and find clear outcomes has been required. Allowing for the project's exploratory nature of the subject of statutory child protection practice has moved me towards incorporating a psychosocial approach within a critical realist frame. The over-arching research question asks:

*What can depth explorations of social workers' subjective responses to work with emotional abuse offer future practice?*

The sub-research questions are as follows:

*1: How do social workers construct evidence of emotional abuse?*

*2: What role do aspects of social workers' subjectivity play in helping them decide that what they are working with constitutes emotional abuse?*

*3: What is the emotional impact on social workers of assessing and intervening with families where emotional abuse is or may be present, and how does this affect their practice?*

*4: What are the 'structural mechanisms' that help social workers process complex information about emotional abuse, make informed decisions and intervene?*

These questions are addressed as a collection of exploratory themes during the research process. It was not the aim to answer each question individually. However, they are attended to with some systemisation in the three analysis chapters, which follow, and addressed again individually in chapter seven where suggestions for future research, practice and development are discussed. The over-arching research questions sets the scene for the sub-questions that follow. It asks that I accompany social workers as they engage in an immersive research journey that encourages them to reflect on their own experiences, so their response might be interrogated and amalgamated with other available knowledge about the subject.

This is in order that guidance regarding the most effective ways of working with emotional abuse can be offered to the social work profession.

'How do social workers construct evidence of emotional abuse' is the first sub-question posed. The use of the word 'construct' in this sense suggests the functional aspect of working with the law. The literature sourced in the review suggests that a problematic relationship exists between social workers and the law. How this impacts on the already complex area of evidencing the less tangible entity of emotional abuse seems to require some further exploration. This is addressed primarily in chapter five, which discussed the identification and evidencing of emotional abuse. This is where the data illuminates the difficulties for social workers attempting to address emotional abuse in a more formal context.

The second sub-question is primarily concerned with unpacking some of the issues raised in the literature review about viewing practice with emotional abuse through a psychosocial lens. The aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the extent to which social workers use skills such as relationship based practice and intuitive and analytic reasoning to engage with assessment and intervention. The use of the term 'subjectivity' is derived here from psychoanalysis and refers to an individual's emotional and personal characteristics, such as their social and cultural background, education and so on. This research positions social workers as subjective beings, who bring aspects of themselves to the job and may therefore 'react to things in ways that feel beyond words' (Rose 2012: 153). Chapter four, 'The role and impact of 'subjectivity' on practice' is where an in-depth consideration of social worker subjectivity begins.

The third sub-question directs me to consider the impact of 'holding' cases for social workers and how they engage with situations they may find personally troubling. The level of personal responsibility that individual social workers assume when supporting families is often implicit in how they discuss their cases. As they share their personal insights it is possible through use of psychosocial methods to acknowledge the extent to which the work impacts on them and, in turn, how this affects the way in which they move forward with addressing instances of intra-familial emotional abuse. These ideas are explored throughout the analysis chapters.

The 'structural mechanisms' in the fourth and final sub-question refer to aspects of the working environment such as supervision, peer support and physical workplace. Supervision and peer support were identified towards the end of the literature review as essential to good practice, so these are areas that require further exploration in relation to work with emotional abuse. This question also seeks to consider the impact of carrying out the research on the participants, such as whether or not it serves as a formative space for social workers to process complex information about emotional abuse. The concept of the 'containing' environment is explored in relation to emotional abuse in chapter six, which is entitled 'Support Systems'.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The ontological premise of the research is located in the real world of the institution of social work. It has critical realist underpinnings derived from the work of Bhaskar (1979) who proposed that reality has depth, and that knowledge about reality is infinite. My perspective on statutory child protection social work in England is rooted in my own practice experience and acknowledges that social workers have specific statutory duties requiring them to protect children from significant harm through abuse and neglect. It is the practical and emotional difficulties of carrying out social work in a real world, not a theoretical one, that is of interest to this research. From a realist perspective the existence of human suffering is not just a 'value-judgment' (Robson 2002).

This is not to say that child abuse, and specifically emotional abuse, cannot be viewed as a 'socially constructed phenomenon' (Houston 2001: 848). The concept of emotional abuse has a recent history (Munro 2008) and it does not command the immediate and decisive action that a physical manifestation of harm through abuse might do (O'Hagan 1993). The causes and symptoms of emotional abuse are not always immediately visible. Its impact may vary according to who experiences it and under what circumstances. Understandings about what constitutes emotional abuse, or even whether it exists, vary according to historical, cultural and geographic context (Iwaniec 2007; Glaser 2012). It is therefore possible to position notions of harm as entirely a matter of interpretation. However, that is not the

premise of this research. I start from the position that the impact on a child from parental emotional abuse is clear and significant regardless of when or where it occurred. Munro (2008: 51) states in relation to attitudes about abuse that 'it is not the behaviour that is socially constructed but the way we talk about it'. In England at the time of writing this thesis, the current welfare system responds to children at risk by positioning emotional abuse not as a socially constructed concept, but as a reality for which social workers hold responsibilities to identify and intervene. The tasks of child protection are not therefore just 'an experiential, intuitive activity' (Sheppard 1995 cited in Houston 2001: 855). Alongside the real world conception of this research is the acknowledgment that social workers are individuals themselves who are influenced by historical, cultural and geographic context. In the 'swampy lowlands' of practice (Schön 1983) considering subjective assumptions about emotional abuse is essential to ensuring social workers respond effectively.

The literature review indicates that emotional abuse is a complicated concept to define and work with, and the laws and statutory procedures that exist to manage it can often seem obtuse and confusing. In addition to this, social workers and the people they encounter are multidimensional individuals whose behaviour is influenced by the relationships and experiences they have already amassed. Bhaskar (1978) suggests a theoretical model to represent the 'stratified' world with its multi-levels of causation, which offers a way of conceptualising the reality social workers inhabit. It has three layers of interest: the actual, the real and the empirical. Bhaskar does not explore what these are in his work, although others such as Jones (2011) and Elder-Vass (2004) have sought to investigate what each layer of the model could represent in a broader societal context.

It has been useful for me to take these explanations a step further and I have drawn on their ideas to demonstrate how the three layers might be applied to the social work profession within the context of my research. These are not static descriptions, and can be reinterpreted according to context. The actual represents the institutional aspect of social work; the policies and laws social workers have available to them to guide their practice. The real represents the individual reflective practitioner who has their own social ideas about relationships and how they engage with the institutional aspects. The domain of the empirical involves the



exploration of these practitioners' deeper thought processes; this is the psychological level at which the social worker experiences their practice. This interpretation of Bhaskar's stratified model has allowed me to move into working with what I see to be the more 'functional' and accessible critical realist ideas of Archer (2007) who views the individual as a 'reflexive agent'. Archer regards the social worker as not merely a representative of the state but a complex and multifaceted being who mediates between their own thought processes and the external world (Archer 2007).

Social workers are not simply rational beings but have conscious and unconscious capacities to express themselves in a variety of ways. Archer addresses the domain of social workers' empirical processes more directly. She proposes that social workers use internal 'analytical narratives' to navigate the difficult terrain in their stratified world between their deeper thoughts, aspects of their own social ideas about relationships, and the laws and policies that guide them. It is their internal voice that directs them how to reconcile 'problems of structure and agency'. In a psychosocial context, it is social workers' use of self in a reflexive way that allows them to make sense of what is happening around them and directs them how to act in a particular situation.

## PSYCHOSOCIAL METHODS

Although I have used the 'anchor' of critical realism to ontologically and epistemologically position the research in the real world of social work practice, I have added psychosocial methods to operationalise the research. Doing this has assisted in the development of in-depth explorations into the challenges child protection social workers experience in assessment and work with intra-familial emotional abuse. The term 'psychosocial' embraces a range of disciplines (Hollway and Jefferson 2013). The approach has been described as more of 'an attitude, a position towards the subject of study rather than methodology' (Clarke 2008:113). In a social work context, psychosocial approaches draw on psychoanalytic theory and practice, which originate from the work of Freud (Trevithick 2012). In essence it is a reflective approach that tries to look 'under the surface' for depth explanations about sociological data. There are a number of

divisions within the psychosocial tradition, but it is most useful to view psychosocial studies as ‘an emergent perspective’ (Clarke and Hoggett 2009:2) that responds to our growing appreciation of the complexity of the individual. The unifying purpose of using psychosocial methods is to bring together the inner and outer aspects of the psychological, through representing what lies beneath the surface. In this research I have sought to explore through individual responses the interplay between ‘what are conventionally thought of as “external” social and “internal” psychic formations’ (Frosh and Baraitser 2008: 347).

Enhancing my methodological approach with additional psychosocial underpinnings has provided a philosophical rationale for exploring the deeper psychological and interpersonal levels at which social workers experience their practice. Psychosocial methods are often used to understand the unique qualities of individuals or the ‘personal identifications’ (Clarke 2004: 120) that underlie the commitment of people who work in welfare to their jobs. In its eclectic composition of influences, a psychosocial approach lends itself well to researching the equally diverse and complex nature of social work practice. It thereby enhances the flexibility of my existing critical realist framework, providing my research approach with a ‘methodological bricolage’ (Kincheloe 2001) that matches the complexity of the subject matter.

A ‘psychosocial’ approach to data collection, offers a collection of approaches from the three disciplines of sociology, social work and psychology with which to facilitate the gathering of the subjective experiences of social workers. The work of Hollway and Jefferson (2012) has been particularly influential on this research project. Hollway and Jefferson differentiate their psychosocial approach to others, particularly those used in medical and health studies, in that theirs pays due attention to the challenge of ‘individual-social dualism’ (Hollway and Jefferson 2012: xiii) rather than by-passing the problems this can create. They clarify their use of the term psychosocial as ‘Conceptualizing human subjects as, simultaneously, the products of their own unique psychic worlds *and* a shared social world’ (Gadd and Jefferson 2007: 4 cited in Hollway and Jefferson 2012: xiii).

There is an emphasis in the work of Hollway and Jefferson on the researcher and participant as ‘co-producers of meaning’ (Clarke 2004: 120), with a focus on aspects such as the unconscious dynamic that arises. This approach has

influenced the shape the research has taken. In using such a methodology, a researcher may, during and after the interview, reflect on their own affective responses, such as unexpected discomfort, or wonder about parts of the participant's narrative that seem incoherent or incomplete. In the case of interviewing social workers about complex cases, considering such subjective reflections as potential counter-transference may be particularly useful in recognising issues such as the unspoken fears a social worker may be experiencing whilst working with children who are suffering emotional abuse. The psychosocial approach provides practical guidance for data collection processes, with an emphasis on open questions, which promote narrative responses from participants.

The application of psychosocial methods is not a new approach, and has been previously used by child protection social work researchers to obtain depth explanations for interpersonal work with abusive behaviours in families by researchers including Cooper and Lousada (2005) and Gilmour (2009). Drawing on their perspectives has ensured that my impact as the researcher has not been ignored. It has supported the acknowledgment of the links between the subject matter and myself as the researcher, developing this connection into a productive and rigorous process of qualitative research. Having reflected on my own training and practice experiences with child protection social work, I am aware that I am inextricably linked to the selection of data and the analysis of it in this thesis. Although I have aimed to challenge my own preconceptions, the thesis inevitably reflects my own standpoint, which the psychosocial approach allows me to consciously embrace as part of the data. The research explores this use of self, by participants as well as myself, in order to look at both depth and surface explanations for social work behaviour when working with emotional harm.

### *'Defended' participants and researcher*

The social workers who took part in the research were given the information sheet (Appendix 3) to read before they volunteered to take part in the research. It explained that psychosocial processes aim to deeply examine responses to questions in order to find out more about how, for example, participants' previous

experiences, views and cultural background contribute to decision-making. Participants understood that the psychosocial research process would involve being asked 'open' questions to discuss different aspects of the job, including their thoughts and feelings. They seemed willing and sometimes relieved to talk about their work.

However, it is often the case in research situations that participants might feel uncomfortable, perhaps experiencing questions as requiring more personal explanations than they expected (Gilmour 2009; Hollway and Jefferson 2014). I have suggested during the analysis that participants have adopted particular positions within the narrative they tell. The psychosocial perspective posits that such position-taking in self-narratives is normative, a way in which people can protect themselves, defending against overwhelming or unbearable affect. I take the position that it is possible that, at times, these research participants (like all human beings) might not fully understand their own feelings or may be compelled, perhaps even unconsciously, to disguise other meanings of some of their emotions and responses to questions (Hollway and Jefferson 2000: 26). I can recognize and acknowledge the same processes in myself when, both as a researcher and social work practitioner, I have experienced a sense of uncertainty. At those times, I have found myself trying to recount events in a way that I think best fit the context of the situation I am in. Supervision, peer discussion and personal reflection, both in practice and through the doctoral process, has offered me a place to consider when and how I might have been trying to conceal my distress at a particular situation or compensate for a sense of inadequacy at my lack of expertise by appearing calm and confident.

Before I started the research I wondered about the extent to which I should 'share' aspects of myself during interviews. During a pilot interview I had attempted to take an enquiring and unknowing stance, which I thought might enable the social worker concerned to impart her experiences more freely. It became immediately apparent to me that my responses were not 'authentic'. Having had 'insider' experience of being a social worker, I not only had background knowledge of the work, but I had developed my own thoughts and feelings about the lack of formal knowledge, apart from risk assessments or checklists, available to guide practice working with emotional abuse, which led to my motivation to carry out this research. It therefore

felt disingenuous and at odds with my social work and research commitments to transparency to be impassive to the response participants gave. During the interviews, the social workers narrated their stories more fluently when they received feedback in the form of insider appreciation: they were encouraged to continue with more nuanced descriptions of their practice once they knew they were speaking to someone who was familiar with their world of work, who was able to empathise with their predicaments.

Achieving 'empathy with boundaries' (Beedell 2009: 107) was challenging at times, as I was fearful that I would give too much, or too little of myself. I wanted to be a containing interviewer who gave participants space to speak freely, whilst offering challenges that allowed them to engage more deeply in discussing their responses to work with emotional abuse. As I became more experienced in the interviewing role I was less concerned about 'getting it wrong'. I also became increasingly aware that I was as likely to be defending against anxiety as the participants. As 'the self is forged out of unconscious defences against anxiety' (Hollway and Jefferson 2014: 17), we must accept that "we are *all* vulnerable and defended beings, and fear is an emotion that has to be recognised and accepted as part of our lives" (Gilmour 2009: 142). The concept of the defended self is central to psychosocial methods and I incorporated this 'affective way of knowing' (Clarke and Hoggett 2009: 12) to assist in making sense of the data I have gathered and analysed. During the process of analysing the research, I have made increasing use of my own emotional response to the participants and the stories they told me. During later listenings to the interviews I have progressed to consider why I was able to give more 'truthful' and transparent responses in some instances and not in others, which I have discussed during the analysis.

The 'defended researcher' is one who, 'by avoiding emotional engagement with any data that produces anxiety for researcher, cuts off the respondent's opportunities for expression' (Beedell 2009: 107). I think if I were to carry out the interviews again I might be more relaxed in the role and respond more openly to the disclosures of the social workers; for example showing my surprise or perhaps disagreement with what was said. Psychosocial methods give the opportunity to explore aspects of research that are troubling and 'chart' why defenses may arise. On reflection, my anxiety about gathering data and not pushing participants too far may have led me

to hold back. This in turn perhaps caused some of the participants to respond to this lack of reciprocity by raising their defenses, and giving less away too. However, striking a balance during a small timeframe with limited opportunities to discuss work in-depth is not easy, and it is only possible to speculate about alternative outcomes.

A criticism of psychosocial studies is that, in being so flexible and in seeking to be a 'trans- (as opposed to inter-) disciplinary practice' (Frosh and Baraitser 2008, 350), it queries its own principles and can be denounced by more conventional disciplines as an 'ill-defined entity' (Frosh and Baraitser 2008, 350). A problem I have encountered during the research process is a tendency to treat my analysis with unending suspicion. I have needed to resist the impulse to continually 'check in' with participants and create additional analysis groups in order to verify the data. I have had to accept that the 'knowledge' I have produced from my exploration of the data can never be certain, and using psychosocial methods in a situation such as this has its drawbacks as well as its strengths.

## RESEARCHER POSITIONING

In considering my position as a social work researcher, aspects of my subjectivity such as my gender and background experiences are important aspects for me to reflect on in relation to how I go about the research tasks. In relation to gender it is the case that some areas being researched by women may retain their barriers. There remain limits to what a researcher can learn. 'Women (or men) in the field, for example, find some doors open more readily than others' (Van Mannen 1988: 4). Social work is still seen regarded as a 'women's occupation' (Perry and Cree 2003: 382), and is arguably a 'feminised' profession (Baines et al. 2014). In 2003-4, there were 699 male applicants for degrees in social work out of a total of 4,272 (GSCC 2004) and in 2015, 75% of members of the British Association of Social workers were female (BASW 2015). I considered in advance of carrying out the research that in comparison to some areas of research, my gender might arguably put me in a stronger position for access. As this was a small qualitative study I could not say if I related more or less well to male and female social workers, or if was accepted any more readily than a male researcher would have been. However, I did not

encounter barriers to access as some female researchers might do in some other more 'masculinised' areas of work.

My previous role as a child protection social worker has given me a degree of 'insider' status. I have experience of working within the area of child protection social work, which prompted my choice of research topic. As a researcher who has also been a social worker, I also have subjective influences and, therefore, an agenda, which has shaped my data collection, analysis and writing style. However, I have approached the 'field' from an academic research perspective, and as a student allied with a university rather than a social worker with the local authority. I was also a statutory child protection social worker for just a year, and there were a number of areas of work I was unfamiliar with, such as giving evidence in court. This position gave me the sense of being an 'outsider' to the worlds of many of the social workers I interviewed. Every person I interviewed was unique and had a different set of subjective experiences to my own. I asked questions of participants from a position of knowing nothing about their individual experiences, and often felt surprised and unprepared for their responses.

I was not able to bring an entirely 'fresh eye' to the research process. I have sometimes needed to appreciate that the 'theoretical stance' I developed before beginning the project (Drake 2010: 98) was in relation to my own experiences and assumptions, and therefore introduced my own subjectivity to the research process. However, I did not automatically understand or have prior knowledge about participants' perspectives or their approaches to the work. Researchers as well as research participants possess complex subjectivity, and the researcher cannot be extracted from the process. I have, therefore, not found the 'binary language of insider-outsider' (Thomson and Gunter 2011: 2) to be particularly helpful in my situation. I consider my identity to have been quite 'liquid' (Thomson and Gunter 2011: 11) throughout the process. I anticipated a vacillation between the dual roles of researcher and social worker, but instead experienced it all as myself, Gemma, who has varying knowledge, competencies and experiences. In some situations my knowledge, competencies and experiences edged me closer to 'knowing' the participants and in others, they served to accentuate our differences.

Points of identification such as education, background, gender and so on, can inspire rapport and a greater enjoyment of the interview situation. I was able to

deploy my 'subjective knowledge' (Hollway and Jefferson 2013: 61) of working in a social work team to assist interpretations of participants' accounts. 'Bridging differences' through listening to a participant's account and producing points of shared subjective knowledge can enable the researcher to be a better informed listener (Hollway and Jefferson 2013: 60). I often appreciated the difficult balance social workers tried to make in looking after themselves as well as doing a good job, because being able to step away from work and focus on myself had seemed challenging during my time as a social worker. Deployment of this subjective knowledge assisted in the interpretation of data, for example when I have sympathized very readily with participant's perspectives. Having the time to reflect and research on both familiar and unfamiliar aspects of practice has allowed for questioning of my own deeply held subjective assumptions about social work practice.

I have become increasingly aware during the research process of how it is possible for me as a researcher to reconstruct my pre-existing interpretation of 'good' social work practices through the analysis, using theory to support my point of view. Researcher reflexivity can be a means of strengthening 'a theoretical conviction' (Hollway and Jefferson 2013: 62) or alerting us to a misreading of a situation. I have tried to be aware of my own influence on the direction the research takes. I have sought to challenge my biases and deepen my knowledge about practice with emotional abuse through the research process. I have been open to reassessing my theoretical perspectives. Importantly, the data provided by the participants has altered me to my own position on points of practice, and I have accepted the uncomfortable sense of having my perspective challenged:

*'...we can only hope to generate new knowledge in so far as we are emotionally and ideologically open to the possibility of discovering something new, including things we really did not want to know' (Cooper 2009: 431).*

The psychosocial approach has been extremely useful in this instance, in that it requires a researcher to use their own emotional and physical reactions to assist in understanding the interview material, thereby providing 'points of entry into data analysis' (Hollway and Jefferson 2013: 166). I have therefore been able to embrace my sense of similarity and difference to the participants, rather than making unrealistic claims to objectivity. In the case of this project, my subjective role of



being a social work researcher has aided the project of understanding research to being at times a messy process (Thomson and Gunter 2011).

In the year before my PhD I completed an MSc in Social Research Methods and carried out some exploratory interviews with a social work colleague to prepare myself for the qualitative interviewing process. Through this I became conscious of judging the 'good' or 'bad' practice being described to me. This influenced the direction of the questions I wanted to ask in the main study, and I was not sure how best to address this. Initially I assumed that being the interviewer gave me more control over the direction the interaction took, which leads to an unavoidable power imbalance. It is misleading to suggest that the interview situation will be entirely a 'joint endeavour' (Kvale 2006). As the researcher, participants may have felt that I had a greater degree of control than them. It seemed to be that some sought to redress the power imbalance; perhaps by taking a teaching stance, telling me about how the job is done. Others performed what they thought was good practice. I was sometimes, particularly at the start of interviews, given a different answer to the question I asked. I think it was the case, in some situations, that social workers arrived with a particular case or issue in mind to discuss, or a point they wanted to make about their experiences of work with emotional abuse. If I asked for an example of a case that was clearly emotionally abusive, I might be told about one that was not, and vice versa.

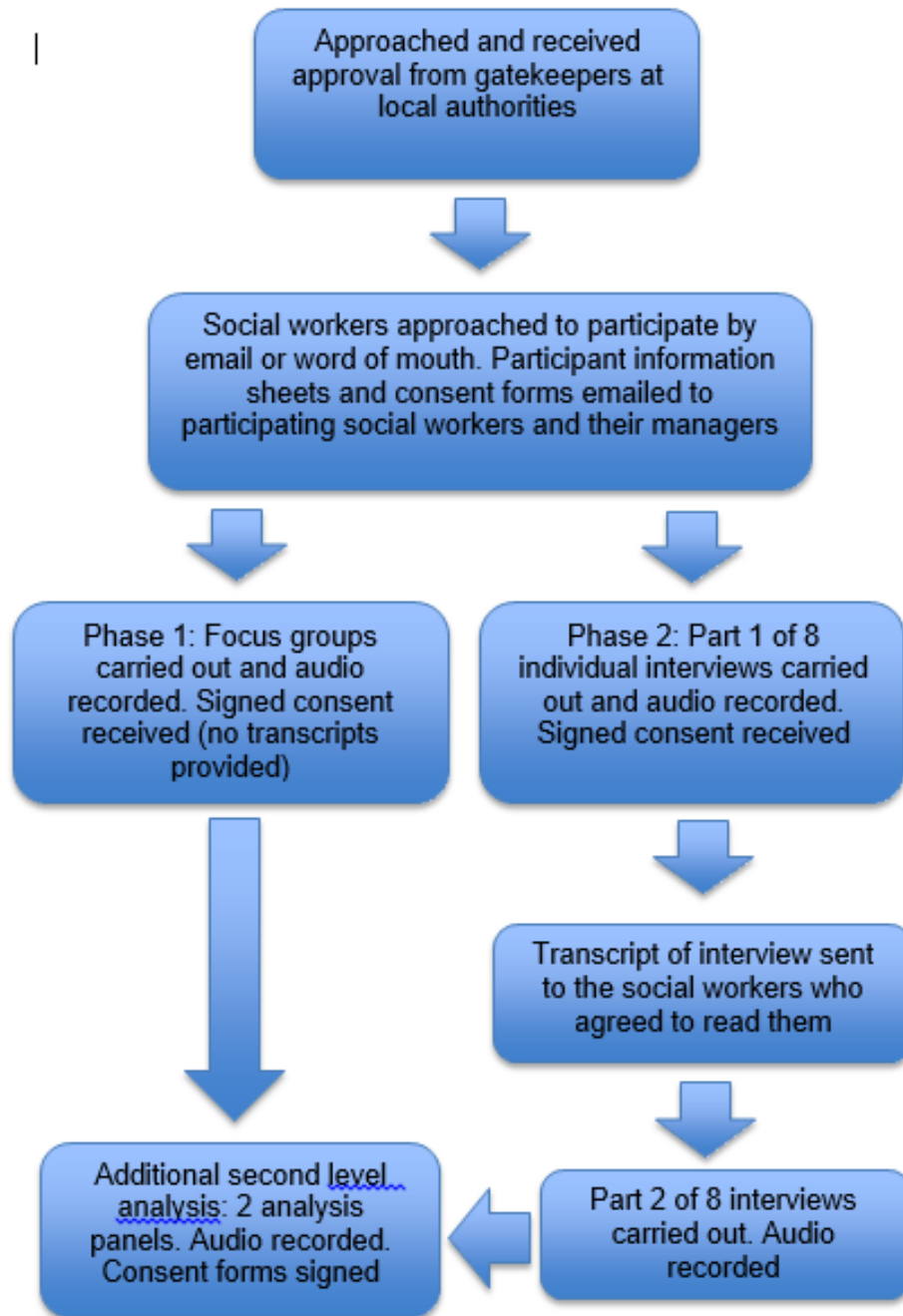
Control over the interview space was negotiated in more functional ways by the social worker deciding how long the interview took, cutting it off when they needed to go to another meeting. There were indicators of being busy, perhaps by the social worker bringing a phone into the interview in case an important call came, or explaining that they had just come from a case conference. This is not to say that the situations were not real life pressures and anxieties, but I felt the dynamic of control tip throughout the interview. They might glance their phone at a point when they perhaps wanted to be distracted from what I was asking. Once participants became settled and involved in their narrative, they often seemed less concerned about rushing off, sometimes re-evaluating their priorities if I reminded them when the time they had allotted was coming to an end. I generally went along with what social workers requested, preferring to take a more passive stance of interest and gratitude rather than making demands.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The research project was designed to be a small qualitative one. Qualitative research methods have 'the unique goal of facilitating the meaning-making process' (Krauss 2005: 763). My understanding of psychosocial methods is that it has an in-depth and eclectic nature. Therefore, the approach can be employed to its best effect when the data sample is manageable enough for the researcher to intimately engaged with it. The fieldwork took place over a period of nine months, beginning in summer 2013. The research design incorporated interviews and focus groups with child protection social workers in the South East of England. Codification, analysis and the write up of material occurred alongside the fieldwork, although much was carried out during the second and third year. Issues around access to informants required me to adapt my plans and methods to ensure the project was completed, so the research design reflects a real world approach and could be described as a flexible one (Robson 2002).

Participants were from two key areas of child protection services: the 'Duty and Assessment Team' (DAT) and the 'Family Support Team' (FST). DATs deal with the initial investigations of abuse cases, referred to social services by other services such as schools, teachers and the police. Cases which are identified as requiring further support and interventions are then passed on to FSTs for longer term work. Although the content of the research was the same with both teams, it was anticipated that DAT social workers might offer greater insight into their initial assessment of cases such as thresholds for concern, and identification of emotional abuse, whilst FST workers might elaborate more on the subjective experience of 'holding' a case over a longer period of time and the process of building relationships with service users.

The process of gaining approval from local authorities to do research with social workers and the interviewing process was carried out over a nine-month period. The research design had a three-phase structure, which is summarised in a flow chart (see figure 3).

**Figure 3:** Research process

I gained approval for carrying out research by following the governance procedures required by the two local authorities I approached. A key reason for approaching two services rather than just one was to improve the chances of accessing

participants within the timescale of the ESRC funding period. One local authority required a lengthy application process, which included a proposal and provision of a disclosure and barring service check, before my application was approved by the local authority's research board. I was then able to approach team managers and their social workers. The other local authority that took part required a less formal approval, which was given following conversations and emails with several senior members of managerial staff before I could contact team managers and social workers. Both local authorities requested reports at the end of the research process so they could read the findings.

The research design consisted of two focus groups, (one with DAT workers, and the other with FST workers) and eight two-staged individual in-depth interviews. Participants of the DAT focus group consisted of a combination of workers from both local authorities, whilst participants from the FST focus group were all from one local authority team. Following gate keeper approval I sent round participant information sheets (see Appendix 3) and consent forms to social workers and their managers, which they signed in advance (see example in Appendix 4 and 5).

Informed consent is an essential starting point for any research project. The ESRC online guide for the Framework for Research Ethics (Ethics Guidebook n.d.) has two core principles concerned with informed consent. Principle two states that:

*(2) 'Research subjects must be informed fully about the purpose, methods and intended possible uses of the research, what their participation in the research entails and what risks, if any, are involved.'*

Social workers who took part in the research were informed that they had the right to know they were being researched, and for what purpose. They were told that the consent they gave could be withdrawn at any time without explanation, and they were free to contact me if they had any concerns later about the inclusion of their interviews. Consent forms included the agreement that the interviews would be audio recorded and for any identifying information to be anonymised.

Before carrying out the research I piloted my questions and my approach during trial focus groups and interviews with social work colleagues. I requested feedback from the participants who took part in the pilot groups and interviews. They were able to identify areas, which needed greater clarification, and allowed me time to consider how to position myself: for example, addressing concerns around my

being a partial 'insider' researcher. I was also able to think about the practical aspects of setting up the sessions, such as the positioning of furniture and use of recording equipment. This helped ensure the sessions ran smoothly; the sound was picked up clearly during recordings and the participants were made as comfortable as possible. The individual interviews focused on eliciting examples of direct experiences from practice, and were planned to be opportunities for social workers to discuss their work in greater depth. Some of the data from a pilot interview is included in the research.

Gaining access to busy social workers was not easy; asking pre-existing contacts in teams to introduce me as an experienced child protection social worker was the most effective approach. I did not pursue contacts further if they were unable to assist me. Social workers were invited by email to take part in the research. Participants were able to choose whether the location of the interviews was their place of work or at the university. It was requested in the participant information sheet (see Appendix 3) and reiterated during initial contact that interviews should be held in a quiet room where, as far as possible, we would not be disturbed.

Participants were volunteers and were included regardless of age, gender, ethnicity or experience. There was a snowball effect as some interested social workers heard from colleagues about the research and contacted me. Some participants attended the focus groups and then offered to take part in interviews. Therefore, most social workers had some prior knowledge of me before participating in interviews. Owing to the demographic of the workplace there were more female social workers, although interestingly more male workers volunteered to be interviewed than anticipated. In the one-to-one interviews half of the participants were men. Arguably, a limitation of using such a small convenience sample is that the findings from the data can lay no claim to statistical representativeness. However, a degree of 'analytic generalisation' (Yin 2003) is possible. The exploratory nature of this research can therefore offer a broader insight into social work practice, and the kinds of participants that research studies attract, thereby preparing the way for 'more "rigorous" surveys' (Maxwell 2007).

Many of the social workers who volunteered to take part in the research were attracted by the reflective nature of the interviewing process and either found it useful in their work, or felt it would be beneficial to take the opportunity to do more

of it. Other reasons for taking part included a commitment to support the production of research to guide social work practice. Others participated because they wanted to think about their practice in a broader context. I formed the general impression that people wanted to help me out, appreciated that I understood child protection social work practice and had struggled with elements of it myself. Some of the social workers who took part in the research said they found the interview to be a helpful experience; particularly those who had thought about cases they wanted to discuss in advance and used it as an informal opportunity to explore their work from a psychosocial perspective. They seemed to benefit more in the sense that they worked through and resolved troubling feelings they had about their practice.

### *Focus groups*

The purpose of holding focus groups was a way of allowing for greater discussion about the nature of work in these two teams; offering the opportunity for 'groupthink', and the chance for me to notice any shared discourses (Kirkman and Melrose 2014). I anticipated that interviewing groups from teams might involve members who knew each other and the familiarity may possibly allow for greater freedom of expression of views. Conversely I also anticipated that on-going disputes or pre-established group dynamics might be brought into the room (Krueger 1994) influencing the direction of conversations, and enabling pre-existing tensions between group members to be played out. I thought that the voicing of views by dominant group members (Albrecht et al. 1993) could be a cause for concern, with less vocal members having fewer opportunities to express their thoughts.

The focus groups lasted for around forty-five minutes. The original plan was to carry out the focus groups first followed by the interview, in order to generate broader themes of interest and recruit individual interviewees. However, practicalities led to the DAT focus group being carried out at the start of the fieldwork and the FST focus group being carried out towards the end of the research process. On reflection, carrying out the research this way did not seem to make a significant difference to the themes discussed in individual interviews, but carrying out the DAT group first did help with access to interview participants. I have indicated the flow of the fieldwork in the diagram by placing the two phases

side by side. There was an overarching emphasis on not having too great an impact on the social workers' busy working day, so the focus groups and interviews were carried out at the convenience of the social workers, generally during lunch breaks.

The focus groups were made up of five or six members from each team. Vignettes of potentially emotionally abusive situations for children were prepared in advance, in case participants needed further prompting to engage in discussion (see Appendix 6 for an example). The scenarios draw on previous research into mandatory reporting of child abuse with the use of vignettes (e.g. Beck et al. 1994). They were developed from case studies I used during my delivery of workshops about emotional abuse to BA Social work students, designed to prompt group discussion. The purpose of the case study in the appendix was to encourage debate about whether a particular situation is emotionally abusive, and if so what would be the possible ways to respond. However, vignettes were not needed as social workers openly discussed how they defined and worked with EA, using anonymised practice examples. The two focus groups were very different, but neither group led to any of the concerns that I had at the outset. Discussions were free flowing and I made minimal comments, allowing for free-association as the practitioners talked about a range of subjects. I noticed that the members were self-moderating, as they took it in turns to speak and offer different perspectives on difficult scenarios of work with emotional abuse. They were supportive of one another and I only felt the need to offer prompts at the beginning to help focus discussion and at the end to draw it to a close.

General topics of discussion in both focus groups included: how they conceptualised emotional abuse; the parental behaviours they observed; the impact of the work on their personal lives; the influence of their own experiences in how they worked with emotional abuse; and support mechanisms like supervision, and the impact of their working environment on their everyday practice experiences. The DAT focus group consisted of a combination of social workers from the two different local authorities. They discussed their experiences and uncertainties about identifying and working with emotional abuse, some aspects of which are considered in the 'evidence and theory' chapter. The FST group were all from the same team and focused their discussion on how they 'held' emotional abuse cases,

and the influence of their working environment. A section of their discussion in relation to peer supervision and hot-desking is considered in chapter six, which explores the support systems available to social workers.

Five social workers participated in each focus group. In the case of the DAT focus group, which I carried out early in the research process, several participants volunteered to take part in in-depth interviews. In the case of FST social workers, I interviewed several participants individually, some of who joined the focus group carried out later on. I interviewed a total of eight social workers twice in one-to-one interviews. Participants who agreed to being interviewed were requested to attend two interviews, with space of around four to six weeks in between each one to allow for analysis of the first interview. In some instances the gap was extended to two months as some interviews were held over the Christmas period.

### *Individual interviews*

Interviews lasted for approximately one hour, although this was carried out flexibly. If for example a respondent was discussing a complex and challenging concern, sensitivity was shown and we ran over time if it seemed appropriate. A 'narrative approach' (Hollway and Jefferson 2012) enabled the respondent to do most of the talking and tell their story, with the aim of exploring the participant's 'inner world'. Achieving a narrative approach involves the use of various techniques. One is to avoid the asking of questions that require 'yes' or 'no' answers (Clarke 2002). Another is to ensure the interviewer asks questions that are not abstract and that relate to the participants' everyday lives.

A semi-structured interviewing approach was used to direct questions and prompts with the aim of promoting depth responses (see Appendix 7 for topic guide). A question can seem to come across as abstract if it is 'introduced abruptly, devoid of context, and prior to the build-up of any rapport' (Hollway and Jefferson 2012: 26). Therefore, some pre-prepared questions were incorporated to allow for rapport to be developed first and to help with the general direction of the interviews. This also provided a degree of standardisation across interviews. The interview schedule included some initial brief questions for participants about levels of experience and time spent in their current team in order to gain key background information and to



put participants at their ease. This was followed by questions designed to elicit examples of work with emotional abuse. Questions included 'Can you tell me about a case you have worked on where you think emotional abuse was present?' A question about worker subjectivity, for example, had to be introduced in a way that was not intangible, but related to their practice experiences. I picked up on factors that social workers mentioned, such as their status as a newly qualified social worker, to explore with them how this aspect impacted on their practice.

Responses were encouraged largely through 'active listening' (Wengraf 2001: 130), using non-verbal communication such as nodding and eye contact to prompt and encourage answers. There were many points during the interviewing process where I wished I were able to film the interviews in an unobtrusive way, as much rich visual data is lost when it is not possible to record participants body language. However, the ethical process of introducing audio-visual recording equipment into the research would have brought with it many more complications and issues around access and consent. I decided to focus primarily on listening to people, rather than taking notes and risk distracting them as they wondered what I might be scribbling down in my notepad.

Before the second interview the first interview was transcribed and underwent initial analysis using Doucet and Mauthner's (2008) 'Listening guide' to build a tiered framework for the analysis of some of the interviews. This process is explained in the data analysis section, which follows this one. Participants were offered a transcript of their first interview to read a week before the second interview, to help them reflect on the interview. The transcripts were emailed, having been anonymised and password protected. The participants were invited to contribute their own reflections on the information they shared.

The second interview provided an opportunity for social workers to reflect deeply on themes that emerged through the initial researcher analysis and the participants' own internal processing of the interview experience. The psychosocial approach to interviewing prioritises personal narratives, using principles such as 'free association' (Clarke 2002). This is where participants are invited to relate about whatever comes into their minds. Participants are encouraged to speak more fluidly, with the intention of eliciting more emotionally motivated narratives rather than rehearsed and rational ones. This enabled social workers to tell their stories from a

perspective which prioritised disclosure of emotional motivations rather than solely rational intentions. Some were more willing and able to engage in than others, depending on their own experiences of reflective practice, and general comfort with openly exploring their inner feelings. We discussed in greater depth aspects of the work that seemed to be of particular significance or interest. Themes identified in the data, such as a social worker's reflections on their relationship with a particular service user, led to further opportunities to discuss how this influenced a particular decision regarding further interventions. They also discussed the experience in more general terms in relation to the development of their work practice.

Participants are not always used to 'telling' about their work and some 'tell more' than others (Eraut 2000: 119). Social workers are often more familiar with discussing their work than many professionals because of the expectations on them to share information inter-professionally, write reports and discuss cases during supervision. I therefore expected them to more easily recall examples of their practice than other groups. This was generally the case, and when it did not happen it caused me to wonder why. I assisted them in 'telling' about their emotional processes by using 'narrative pointed' questions (Wengraf 2001: 126) such as, 'That sounds difficult, can you tell me more about how that felt...?', to elicit information about their experiences. The purpose was to capture some theoretical concepts in action, which could be distilled and reported back to them. I prompted them with phrases such as: 'It seems like you have a good relationship with this mother, can you tell me more about it...?' I found that an open style of questioning elicited more thoughtful responses which either supported or conflicted with the literature and knowledge I had amassed about emotional abuse so far, leading me to ask more questions or to review more literature.

During the course of interviewing I carried out one interview with a supervisor, which I anticipated would offer a different perspective. As the supervisor expressed his frustrations about social workers who were not 'practice-ready' or resilient enough to trust to do the job, I realised that in order to fully represent managerial perspectives it would be necessary to significantly broaden the scope of the research. Although this would have enriched the study, I did not have the time or resources that adding an additional level of data collection would require. For this reason extracts from the supervisor's interview was not included in the final

research. Gaining a fuller picture of supervisor and supervisee relationships in work with emotional abuse would make an interesting area for exploration in a future study.

Although the focus groups and the one-to-one interviews offered a depth insight into the thought processes of the participants, looking 'under the surface' within the confines of limited time and resources was of course restricted, and did not offer the level of detail that might be achieved through longer term research approaches. For example, observations of practice or carrying out an ethnographic study may have led to further insights. These methods were discounted during the proposal stage of the research, in part to focus exclusively on the social work experience and in part to meet the practicalities of access, time, resources and ethical procedures. However, I think that my own experience of the area allowed for some short cuts to be made to my understanding of every-day child protection social work experiences. In addition, the insights that were offered had the advantage of removing the performance pressures social workers may associate with being observed in their practice and the danger as a researcher of becoming too immersed in 'the field'.

Table 4 below shows profiles of the social workers and panel members of social work students who took part in the research and whose words appear in the final thesis. All of the names used are pseudonyms.

**Table 4:** PROFILES OF PARTICIPANTS (listed alphabetically)

NAME	TEAM	GENDER	APPROXIMATE YEARS SINCE QUALIFICATION	INDIVIDUAL/ GROUP INTERVIEW
Becca	Student	Female	Not yet qualified	Panel analysis
Bryony	FST	Female	8	Individual & group
Chris	FST	Male	4	Group
Fiona	DAT	Female	5	Individual & group
Jessica	FST	Female	8	Group
Leon	DAT	Male	1	Individual & group
Li	FST	Female	14	Individual & group
Sean	FST	Male	7	Individual & group

Sky	DAT	Female	4	Group
Theresa	FST	Female	5	Individual & group
Tom	FST	Male	6	Individual
Vicky	DAT	Female	4	Individual
Wesley	Student	Male	Not yet qualified	Panel analysis

## DATA ANALYSIS

How social workers are affected by what they are discussing can offer much rich and interesting data. Hollway (2009) refers to 'using the researcher's subjectivity as an instrument of knowing' (463). During exploratory interviews as an exercise for the MSc module 'Methods in Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis' I noticed that social workers used metaphorical language such as 'fire-fighting' to describe working to reduce harm in the family home. Their tone would rise in pitch to emphasise the urgency and immediacy of the work they were describing. The participants in this research were recorded to be able to recall the vocal force behind language. During the fieldwork all interviews were fully transcribed, coded and sub-coded using the computer package Nvivo to assist in the task of categorising themes and identifying significant statements. I generated the codes as I listened to the data, and common themes began to emerge from discussions. I segmented participants words into categories or 'nodes' in Nvivo, such as 'use of theory' or 'relationships'. I then, where necessary, broke these down into sub categories such as 'supervisor-social worker relationship' or 'parent-social worker relationship'. Following this, I applied identified theories from the literature to the themes that arose, for example, ideas around levels of empathy that are used in relation to work with families and children.

Using a computerised system was useful but it took a long time to code all the data and occasionally my expectations exceeded its capacity as a qualitative analysis tool. At times, coding the interview material resulted in the production of fragmented data. I did not want to decontextualize participant's statements and lose their intended meaning. I needed to look back to the whole interview at times to ensure I was not taking statements too far out of their original context. Therefore, as convenient as it was to categorise everything, I revisited whole interviews at times to regain the overall context of what a respondent said in order to maintain the

meaning of what they were saying. Using psychosocial methods to identify issues such as transference and counter-transference between interviewee and interviewer was a key aim. This requires a 'gestalt' approach where the 'whole is greater than the sum of the parts' (Hollway and Jefferson 2013: 64). Listening back to conversations several times allowed for consideration of the nuances and expression in people's voices, and provoked opportunities for close examination of feelings, perhaps of anxiety or empathy that were evoked in me through hearing their stories.

I followed the suggested stages of Doucet and Mauthner's (2008) 'Listening guide' in order to construct a framework for analysing some of the interviews. This is a listening method with a flexible structure. It consists of four main readings of a text, which may be adapted according to 'the nature of the topic under investigation' (Doucet and Mauthner 2008: 405). During my first 'listening to' the transcripts I applied themes, pulling out evocative descriptions of cases, 'listened' for plot, and recorded my initial responses. I also listened out for my own reactions to what I was hearing and how that impacted on the prompts I made. I checked out the 'meaning-frame' (Hollway and Jefferson 2013) of the social workers I interviewed to clarify if we had similar understandings about their responses to the situation we were discussing, so that as far as possible, I did not misinterpret their intended meaning. During a second level of analysis, I focused on the 'active I' in people's stories: trying to explore their subjective influence on their decision-making. A third listening, 'reading for relationships' (Mauthner and Doucet 1998), revealed the nature of connection and rapport the social workers, I thought, had with their clients. A fourth stage of listening placed people in their cultural context to understand how individual social workers negotiate aspects of their own identities within their broader work environment. Listening to the interviews in this way, multiple times, allowed me to view the participants from different perspectives, offering a deeper and more complete view of them. This was a time-consuming but fascinating task, which drew me deeper into the analysis. The structure it offered prevented me from falling into the trap of analysing one element of an interview in isolation from another. It also allowed me the opportunity to reflect upon my various positions of researcher and social worker.

There is the issue of 'wild analysis' to consider, which involves the researcher drawing conclusions about interactions without any real basis for them. It is where instances of psychological issues such as transference are perceived in every utterance, but the speculations made about the participants are not tested for reality (Hollway and Jefferson 2012; Hoggett et al. 2010). Interpretations may therefore be over-coloured by the interviewer's experiences. A concern for me during the ethical review process was that, having been a child protection social worker myself, I would perhaps identify too readily with the struggles of the participants and draw conclusions about data gathered from interviews that overlooked other possible explanations. I subsequently introduced a 'second level' of data collection during the analysis phase. Following discussions with another doctoral student who had used the panel analysis method, I decided to incorporate this approach. It is a technique, which originates from Wengraf's (2004) 'Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method' (Hollway and Jefferson 2000). It brings external members to the research process with the intention of introducing diverse viewpoints, thereby improving researcher objectivity.

I found it reassuring to share troubling data during the process of analysis, in much the same way as a social worker may be supported by their team when they are working with a complex case and may be experiencing a variety of psychodynamic processes. When the purpose is to look under the surface of what is going on, it has been suggested that 'it requires two minds to think a person's most disturbing thoughts' (Ogden 2009 cited in Hollway & Froggett, 2012: 281). I wondered, for example, if people who had not been as submerged in the data as I had been would make different observations to mine. I held two research analysis groups. One was made up of four MA social work students attending the university where I was undertaking my doctorate; and this is drawn upon in the first analysis chapter. The second was made up of six social workers recruited from a post-qualifying course they were attending at the same university. Both groups were offered quotes from interviews and asked to consider what was going on in the excerpts, what their reactions to the data were, and if it deepened their understandings of work with emotional abuse. I found the panel to be useful, in part, because they 'kickstarted' the interpretive process (Wengraf 2011). The different kinds of input, I think, provided some checks and balances against the 'inherent epistemic risk' of wild analysis (Hollway and Jefferson 2013).

### *Gaining ethical approval and proceeding ethically*

Ethical approval for my plans was given by the University of Sussex Ethical Review panel in August 2013. It has always been a priority to me that the interests of the children, families and the local authority social workers who took part in the research have taken precedence over the production of data during the research. As situations which involve children and families who are 'particularly vulnerable' (C-REC ethical review form 2012) were discussed, information I was privy to had to be handled carefully. Discussion of cases during interviews inevitably occurred so discretion and respect for participants and their service users were a priority. Completion of the ethical review form was a useful process for me as it allowed me to consider the kinds of specific situations that might arise during the research process and how to address them. The ethical review form did not suggest I go into detail about individual situations and it was in fact quite a generalised paperwork exercise in assessing risk for the participants and families concerned and also for me as the researcher. Having carried out risk assessment related forms as a social worker I found it to be a helpful process, and used the form's standardised questions as prompts to think in a deeper, multi-dimensional way about ethical concerns.

Up until this point I had been submerged in literature and theorising about the research, so it was refreshing to be able to change focus and move the participants back to the centre of the research. Ethics is intended to be 'about concrete rather than generalised situations' (Edwards 2012: 16). Therefore, being able to consider the practicalities of the research was a useful exercise. I thought about the questions in terms of specific situations that could arise and I imagined what an interview might look and feel like. I made space to think about how to protect the identities of the participants and the families they discussed, beyond simply changing their names.

During the research process I have followed the professional codes of conduct set out by three organisations: firstly, the research funding agency, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC); secondly the professional social work council I am a member of, the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC); and thirdly, the

institution at which I have carried out my research, the University of Sussex (UoS). Each set of regulatory bodies has a different focus to the ethical process, which allowed me to think about different domains of ethical research behaviour. The ESRC guided my consideration of various issues such as anonymity and informed consent. For example: informed consent was acquired to ensure participants were aware of what the research involved. This encouraged me to develop my thinking towards using methods of containment to help to minimise potential psychological stress or anxiety during interviews. The HCPC informed my social work orientated responses to protecting and upholding the rights of the individual. The duties in the HCPC guidelines emphasise the wellbeing of participants, and I therefore considered how I monitored this through both verbal and non-verbal communication. For example, a social worker seemed distressed during an interview but wished to continue to talk about a particular subject in spite of this. I was concerned for their wellbeing, and made the judgment that it would be more ethical not to continue to push on with questions about the subject at that time. The UoS ethical review application was an opportunity to consider multiple practical ethical issues, and make contingency plans to cover unforeseen concerns. This gave me an oversight of the ethical terrain of the research.

During the ethical review process I explored how the research could induce psychological stress or anxiety for the participants. The subject matter concerns child abuse which participants were used to discussing, but the extent to which they talked about their work in relation to their emotional responses to these situations varied. I found that the more nuanced aspects of the ethical processes of the research could not be covered in procedures and guidelines. The psychosocial methods I have used raise ethical issues as I used them to explore the inner worlds of the participants. At times during the interviews I was aware the participants might have been feeling emotionally vulnerable or experiencing reactions to issues they might not have engaged with up until that point. I was conscious that issues such as participant levels of experience could also play a role in how the research might impact on them.

For example, during the interviews some social workers began to consider the idea that they were dismissing their concerns about emotional abuse because they did not know what to do about them. In their narratives they sometimes relived



experiences that they had found difficult, or accessed emotions they had perhaps suppressed. It is possible that my prompts to discuss these issues more may have caused them distress. I used what I considered to be my experiences of counter-transference with them, such as feelings of anxiety and fear, to decide whether or not to prompt them to discuss it in more detail, weighing up whether it was ethically sound to cause them or myself greater distress. Such situations included when interviews prompted me to recall when I had found discussing aspects of my own social work practice distressing, or felt I had not done as good a job as I could have done because of my lack of experience or expertise.

I found that using Bion's ideas of containment in the interview context required me to use my own skills and judgments. 'The creation of safe spaces' (Ruch 2005a: 662) is necessary to realise the potential of reflective practice, so that social workers can make sense of the daily uncertainty and anxiety they encounter. I endeavored to provide a safe and containing context in various practical and interpersonal ways. From a practical perspective, I met participants who volunteered to take part in individual interviews in a place of their choosing and explained that anonymity would be ensured for both them and their clients. I reiterated their freedom to withdraw from the research process at any point without explanation if they changed their minds. These practical measures were intended to ensure participants did not feel under any pressure to take part and they could participate in a way that they felt was safe and that they had some control over. The interpersonal measures I took to provide a containing environment were to listen closely to what participants said, and allow space for them to discuss aspects of their practice with emotional abuse that they felt was important. I promoted opportunities for reflection, and showed concern when something was distressing to them. Aspects of the 'unconscious intersubjectivity' (Hollway and Jefferson 2012: 46) of the researcher and the participants were only explored in as much depth as the participants were comfortable with, without putting them under pressure to explore ideas in any more depth than they wanted to.

I offered containment to participants by checking with them about how they were feeling. I offered various options depending on the individual situation. For example, offering to continue discussing the subject, or to explore their feelings around it, or to move onto something else. Other than verbal indications, signs of distress within

the interviews included crying, anger, and requests that we draw the interview to a close. At times, I steered the conversation onto lighter issues, particularly when we approached the end of the interview and I was aware they needed to return to their work without feeling overwhelmed with thoughts about the situations they had discussed. I drew on my social work practitioner skills, and knowledge about psychological processes such as emotional regulation, when continually reflecting on the progress of the interviews to ensure the participants were not 'pushed' to talk about issues they were not happy to discuss. It is possible I was not always successful in my approach but, when I invited feedback, participants did not indicate this was the case.

### *Anonymity and confidentiality*

Research can be viewed as an invasion of privacy or an intrusion (Flick, 2009), so efforts were made to respect participants' rights to privacy, confidentiality and anonymity at all times. Gatekeepers and participants were reassured that the rights of families and children to confidentiality would be upheld. Practical steps to safeguard identities were taken by using pseudonyms during interviews. As far as possible real names were not mentioned. Any accidental mentions of names and places were anonymised during transcription, and files were password protected. Participants were advised about who had access to the recorded interviews, transcripts and data and where they would be stored and for how long (Blumer 2001). After the first individual interview participants were provided with transcripts in part so they could make a 'knowledgeable and voluntary decision' about whether or not the data they were helping to generate was included in the research (Peled and Leichtentritt 2002: 156).

The characteristics of smaller samples and the emphasis on details about people's lives (Shaw 2008: 409) means the potential risk of identifying features emerging is more likely (Blumer 2001). Descriptions of work places in research by participants often reveal their identities. Previous research indicates that participants 'give away' who they are, along with their opinions 'about the site and its management' (Tilley & Woodthorpe 2011: 202). It has been a priority in this research, as far as possible not to give away who participants are, so their work with families and other

professionals is not revealed. Descriptive elements, which are not crucial to the analysis, have been altered so that cases, families, children, workers and the area they are located in cannot be identified. Given the sensitivity of the details shared by participants about their own experiences and the experiences of the families they worked with, the work of individual social workers has not been presented as case studies. It quickly became apparent during the analysis process that it would have been almost impossible to be able to adequately anonymise the identities of participants. Therefore, excerpts from interviews have instead been selected to highlight particular issues.

My ethical duties as a researcher and a registered social worker imbue me with an obligation to address any concerns I may have for the wellbeing of vulnerable people. It was possible during the interviewing process that disclosures made by social workers might give cause for action. During the ethical review process, I stated that concerns will be discussed with the relevant social worker before pursuing any further action, and this proviso is included in the consent form (see Appendix 5). No such instances arose, but had they; concerns would have been referred to a member of management within the relevant organisation. My own supervisors, one of whom was a registered social worker with child protection experience, were available to discuss any concerns I had.

During the ethical review process it was necessary to consider the reasons why the research might have an emotionally disturbing impact on me, as the researcher. A reason for this included hearing about the details of child abuse cases, which was likely to be disturbing at times. In addition to this, the impact of the interviews might have had an effect on me through psychological processes such as counter-transference. I anticipated that social workers might project feelings of despair and hopelessness onto me during interviews, reminding me of previous experiences of the work. This could evoke similar feelings of despair and hopelessness. In addition to this I predicted I might feel concerned for the social workers about the challenges presented by the work.

I planned to monitor the extent of my emotional responses through personal reflections. In part, I managed this by keeping a journal, noting down my responses to the interviews and the emotions they elicited. One entry on 1 November 2013 following an interview reads:

*My immediate impression of situation is that this is so incredibly complex – the layers, being in the home, the behaviour, the work relationship, behaviour in terms of avoidance – turning questioning around, intense (to me) who has the control? Why did they agree to interview?*

This also formed part of the analysis process, as the more closely I was able to monitor my own reactions, the greater my insight into the data. Having had experience of similar reflective processes previously during my training as a child protection social worker, I anticipated it would be difficult at times, which it was, but this previous experience enabled me to plan to support myself through the process.

The kind of external support measures I drew on included use of supervision time where I talked openly about concerns with my supervisors who advised me on how to make use of my emotional responses to the participants. A supervision recording from 21 January 2014 concerns my reflections on a part-transcript about one participant's interview and my initial analysis of this. My supervisor's suggestion is for me to note down my own responses to interviewees, e.g. why I wanted to reassure the participant, bearing in mind both reactive and proactive countertransference. We developed this thought process in a subsequent supervision session when we talked about how my countertransference to two of the participants helped me to think about the impact they might have on colleagues and on service users. This enabled me to consider the impact of workers who pushed their feelings away and tried to present as not too affected by the work, and others who perhaps became rather overwhelmed by or enmeshed with their work.

I accessed peer support in the form of other doctoral students to work through data that presented 'blocks' for me. These supportive measures provided easily accessible means for discussing any potentially distressing issues. This gives the impression of a very neat and contained process, but of course no emotionally disturbing process is that simple. The most useful aspect of carrying out the research was legitimately affording myself more space and support to process uncomfortable feelings, to understand my 'blocks' and overcome them. For example, feelings of anger and frustration during an interview situation could be shared and processed whereas in the case of working with children and families

there is often little or no space to step away from a challenging situation. The processing of feelings must be achieved far more quickly or managed in other ways.

During planning conversations in supervision sessions, the appropriateness of providing participants with cash incentives was discussed. Providing incentives is an ethically complex area and incentives could be conceived of as a form of coercion, influencing participants' consent (Head 2009). Any financial incentive were a nominal amount, such as travel costs, and did not encourage participants to disclose information they would usually withhold or to provide false data. 'Rewards', or expression of thanks for their involvement (Head 2009: 337), were made in small gifts such as boxes of chocolates.

## ETHICAL CONCERNS

A commitment to approach the research ethically is at the heart of this project. Ethical conduct goes beyond filling out an ethical review form and ensuring the terms of its acceptance are adhered to. I have constantly reviewed and re-mapped decisions about how to manage the interview data. Reflection in action has been vital, as it must be whenever 'researching familiar, intimate and sensitive areas of social life' (Birch and Miller 2014: 15). The nuanced conversations I have had with people have required me to draw on my own subjectivity to determine how best to deal with each situation, as there is not one 'code' or 'accessible moral map' of what is deemed to be ethical according to social work research (Butler 2002: 240). I have often used my judgment and training to make decisions, particularly about how far to coax a participant to talk about a challenging situation. I have regularly reflected back on situations, wondering if my approach was effective, adequately persistent or considerate enough.

Relationships of trust are 'fundamental to the research process' (Mauthner 2012: 164). Without the generosity of the social workers who offered up their time to share the intimate aspects of their work, I would not have been able to gather any data. Although the potential risks were outlined clearly in the participant information sheet (see Appendix 3) and informed consent was acquired throughout the process, I was also conscious of an unspoken element of trust between the participants and myself. Asking people to sign consent forms in some ways places the onus on

participants and overlooks the 'power differentials between researchers and respondents' (Mauthner 2012: 164). A form does not cover the notion that participants are put in a vulnerable position when they entrust their personal stories to a researcher to do 'the right thing' with them. In seeking informed consent to data sharing, I needed to think about what the possible repercussions might be for the participants. At times I, as the researcher, may have had a clearer idea of these possibilities than they did. For example, I was aware of the importance of adhering to a thorough process of anonymisation, so that when the interview material is shared through the ESRC data repository, identities of participants are adequately disguised.

During the interviewing and analysis process I have remained aware that it is possible to misinterpret data and project one's own feelings about a situation on to the participants. I tried to check in at points during interviews to verify whether meaning was shared, at the same time prompting for more information. This was particularly important when a participant seemed to be anxious if I felt a sense of anxiety too. There was no certainty without constant checking whether my emotional responses were a projection of what they were experiencing. This is particularly important when data is 'fragmented', and the overall form of it is broken down and segmented during the analysis process. There are a number of concerns about what Clarke and Hoggett (2009) call '*mis-re-presentation*' (20) of participants that have occurred throughout the research process. For example, participants entrusted their thoughts to me about contentious issues, which gave me a duty of care to use the data in a way that was respectful to them. Selective use of interview transcripts inevitably fragmented the data. I had to be mindful that I could be using the data to fit my own preconceived ideas so that I might answer the research questions in a way that proved my own supposition that emotional abuse can be difficult to work with.

This is a disadvantage of using the psychosocial method, as it often causes a sense of uncertainty. 'There is no way of proving that the researcher's conclusions are correct, and uncertainty has to be tolerated' (Gilmour 2009: 133). Arguably this is the case in any kind of data analysis. Another reader of the same data, for example, may form different thoughts and opinions about it. As a psychosocial researcher, one's own emotional responses to encounters with participants must be

taken into consideration. The approach has the added dimension of interrogating interpretations of the data, and acknowledging any uncertainty about meaning that is drawn from it. Understanding the reasons chosen for taking a particular analytical path are as important as the analysis itself.

Gilmour (2009) discusses fear as an interviewer, which I experienced in a variety of ways during the data collection and analysis process. I have used my own reflexivity to consider my defended responses to participants and been aware of my feelings of resistance to hearing what they were telling me. My reflexivity has allowed me to consider when I have experienced 'proactive' counter-transference: responses that I recognise to 'belong' to me, and to be a consequence of my own personal and professional history. Or, when I have experienced 'reactive' counter-transference. That is to say, when I feel my responses to a particular situation, have been 'almost conjured' out of me (Lefevre 2008: 85). I have been alert to the importance of transparency, responding openly and honestly to participants. I have reflected, on occasion, after interviews when I have felt that I have failed to be transparent, and when I have perhaps suppressed my own responses.

The direction each interview took was different. Every interview offered a variable set of dynamics depending on whom I was speaking to, where the interview was taking place and the issues that arose through case discussions. Initially the analysis process that followed felt very intimidating, as I listened to the recordings and recalled my feelings about the interviews; I looked around for rules to follow in order to legitimise my observations about them. I was not too concerned that my analysis did not appear scientific. Although missing something really important that would be glaringly obvious to the rest of the world was of concern to me, I was satisfied that I was being rigorous in my approach to the analysis. I was, however, concerned that I would misrepresent what people had told me. Making them 'look bad' after they had given up their time was personally troubling to me. I used the process of free writing in my journal to help process the feelings I had that seemed to abstract to articulate to start with. I wrote without stopping for ten minutes, putting any thoughts that came into my head, no matter how irrelevant they seemed, down on paper. I filled blank pages, finding that my feelings of guilt and shame would emerge out of phrases such as *'can't get past barriers, why I feel like this is so difficult, what if I get it wrong??'*

The more pragmatic process of the ethical review process prior to the fieldwork allowed me to consider how to deal with aspects of the research process, such as the possibility of participants withdrawing consent. It was feasible that discussing the emotional aspects of the job would reveal sensitive information that social workers might later wish they had not disclosed. I reiterated to them throughout the process that they could refuse to answer questions or later withdraw consent without explanation (Bryman, 2001). One of the FST participants did not participate in a second interview. She cancelled it a few times due to work commitments and gave no reason other than being too busy. Another two social workers initially offered to take part, but were not available for interview when the time came.

It may have been that people were busy, but I did consider at the time that their non-attendance might have been caused by the potential anxiety they may have felt when faced with the reality of sharing their personal stories. On the other hand, I met with another FST participant on three occasions. In this case, the second interview was curtailed early as the social worker needed to attend to an emergency situation. She was keen to finish discussing subjects we had touched on but not explored in greater depth. There was no pressure or expectation of a third interview and I wondered later on if that particular social worker had felt the need to meet again, not just to help me out, but to experience the containing environment of the interview space.

At times during the research process, I wondered if my commitment to ethical research practice on paper was borne out in my work. In the months after my fieldwork, if I met a participant and they enquired if their data had been used in the research it led me to revisit and reconsider the analysis I had carried out. The words of a participant can quickly become data on the screen, and meeting them again in person cast doubt on the seemingly 'flat' and one dimensional representations I had made of them. I felt a similar uncertainty about whether I was doing the right thing with what people had told me, in a way that was reminiscent of when I was a practicing social worker. Although 'doing social work research' is not the same as 'doing social work', the research process has afforded me time to reflect on my social work practice, giving me a deeper appreciation of my own style of working. In terms of the research process, it has allowed me to gain a greater



appreciation of why I sympathise with certain social workers' approaches to work with abuse more than others.

With this greater self-awareness, I have made more critical attempts at 'psychosocial methods', interrogating my counter-transference experiences in pursuit of a more balanced representation of the practices of the social workers I have interviewed. For example, months after feeling angry and frustrated, or sad and despairing following an interview, I have looked back on them and listened at yet another level, and observed the 'projective dynamics' of the relationship between the participant and myself (Alexandrov 2009). At the time I thought I listened as impartially as I could, but several months on I was able to see my subjectivity intruding into my thought processes, and therefore the analysis. For example, I had a growing certainty that everyone I interviewed was defending against his or her anxieties in work with emotional abuse, because that is what I became accustomed to looking for. Understanding that my view of the world may in some ways conflict with that of the participants' is an element of using psychosocial research methods. Its openly reflective stance arguably enhances 'the ethical dimension of knowledge production' (Alexandrov 2009, 38).

When I initially prepared my ethical concerns section for my proposal I explained that, because I understood the complexity of carrying out casework, I would be able to display sensitivity in my interviewing; for example, withdrawing from a line of questioning if necessary. Looking back at my approach to the ethical process, I still believe it to be sound, but it lacked an appreciation of how complex and problematic the interviewing processes can be. In spite of my careful preparation, fieldwork and analysis, much insight into the data, I have no doubt, remains unknown to me.

## CHAPTER CONCLUSION

The profession of social work can be regarded as a science that deals with objects of the social and psychological 'worlds' (Blom 2009), which makes it more unpredictable than the objects of most sciences. Consequently, a psychosocial approach to exploring the empirical experiences of social workers has been chosen as the most suitable method of enquiry for this project. This has been placed within

a critical realist framework which acknowledges the real world concerns of work with emotional abuse, offering an 'anchor' for the more interpretive methods of a psychosocial approach. An overarching research question and four research sub-questions have been posed which address contained aspects of the wider research concern. The use of semi-structured interviews and focus groups have provided the opportunities to gain in-depth responses for social workers about these key areas of their work. A sensitive and thoughtful approach is necessary for researching the subject matter and the associated experiences of the participants. Therefore, attention has been paid to important ethical concern such as the protection of the identities of the participants. Their wellbeing during the research process has been considered throughout. The data gathered is now addressed in a series of three analysis chapters.

## **CHAPTER 4: THE ROLE AND IMPACT OF ‘SUBJECTIVITY’ ON PRACTICE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the empirical experience of some of the social workers I interviewed, as discussed in the methodology, exploring the less traversed ‘confusing messes’ of human concern (Schön 1983). The aim is not to emphasis what I considered to be good or bad practice, but to bring focus to the nuances of individual approaches to work with emotional abuse. The chapter starts by looking briefly at some of the influences participants believed brought them to child protection social work. It then moves on to a deeper consideration of the way in which one particular social worker, Fiona<sup>1</sup>, personally invests in her practice; her use of empathy and reflective practice. I made use of an analysis panel to gain further insight into Fiona’s practice, and to explore my role as a defended researcher.

Social worker Tom, whose practice is discussed throughout the thesis, is then considered for his more ‘knowing’ approach to supporting parents and his explanation for finding reflective space in his every day work. Within the context of broader issues such as ‘the system’ and the working environment, social worker Sean’s more subdued defenses and unspoken worries are explored. Some of the more complex aspects of relationships, such as the ‘drama triangle’ between social worker, parent and child are discussed. The chapter concludes with my reflections on varying ways in which the participants used the space of the interview to think about their cases and their practice.

An aim of the chapter is to illuminate the range of complex and often non-rational ways the social workers interviewed make sense of themselves and the world they work in. Exposing the vulnerabilities and strengths of social workers, and myself, as fallible and unique practitioners has been a challenging experience. It has however proved necessary in order to assist in understanding the decision-making

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms have been used throughout, in order to maintain confidentiality.

processes and interventions they engage in as they work towards protection of the child they encounter. The aspects of subjectivity discussed are areas of individuality relating to practice explored during the research, that I identified during the coding of the data. These include gender, class, education, professional training, age, level of experience, life experiences such as being a parent, culture, heritage, race, childhood experiences including being parented. This is not an exhaustive list of relevant aspects that contribute to subjectivity, but areas that were identified in the data in this particular research by me. It is likely that another researcher analysing the data would identify other factors. For example, someone interested in the impact of spiritual belief on practice may have integrated questions about religion into the topic guide, and consider religious denomination to be of relevance. If the research has been carried out elsewhere, the factors would also vary. For instance, the locality the research was gathered in is a fairly homogenous one where the population is predominantly white British. Issues around ethnicity in relation to working with emotional abuse emerged briefly during my analysis, demonstrated in the thesis in discussions with Li, in chapter five. This would undoubtedly be of more central concern if the research has been carried out in a different part of the country. The qualitative, small-scale nature of this doctoral research means that it cannot represent all social workers, in all aspects of their subjectivity. It simply offers some examples of aspects of subjectivity, and some groundwork for further development in the area.

## PERSONAL MOTIVATION AND ITS CONSEQUENT IMPACT ON PRACTICE

The research participants shared their insights about how they thought their own personal experiences influenced their motivation to become social workers. The kind of information they gave me seemed to depend on factors including how comfortable they felt about sharing personal information with me, and the extent to which they had already processed their feelings about personal difficulties in their own lives. Some spoke more about the impact of their own childhood experiences upon their choice of career, whilst others preferred to focus on the learning opportunities that influenced their work. Most combined both, often legitimising their motivation or experiences with positive functional outcomes. For example,

several people talked of their struggles to be listened to as a child or young person, and how this contributed to their determination to ensure the children they work with are supported to speak out.

*Theresa: ...But my starting point with the children, and I guess some of it is also down to personal experience because I can remember a lot from my childhood where I knew I needed a voice but I didn't know how to speak out myself. And if only I'd had a person that would listen to me. Yeah? And then maybe share that for me. I didn't feel I ever had a ... sometimes an advocate. So I know how difficult it is for children.*

What follows are brief profiles of several social workers who took part in the research, and their own examples of what they consider to be their personal relationship with their chosen area of social work.

### *'Bryony'*

Bryony has worked as a child protection social worker for around eight years and on several occasions during interviews reflected on the influence of her father's experiences of being parented as an inspiration for her career choice. She often indicated an interest in making sense of the successes and failures of a care system that had a significant impact in unexplained ways on her and her family.

*My dad grew up in care but he's a really stable, functioning adult and his siblings are not. It baffles me... And I think that's partly why I came into this job...his brother was horribly violent.*

Bryony spoke more about her family before going on to say about her father:

*...It's not just, he's, he's not violent in any way. He's never been violent. He's got a real good, he's very sensitive. Got a good understanding... he's probably a bit, he spoils the kids a bit and can't say no (laughs) but it baffles me...why, and his brother was horribly violent. And his sisters' got serious mental-health problems and they've had all their kids by different men. All their kids are in prison. And all sorts of stuff like this. I just don't understand what was different for him and when I think when I work with my families, I think, "What, you know, what is it that could make it alright for you? What is it that can... make this side of life, see you through what's difficult?" Because everybody has difficulties, don't they? Everyone, like you say, different things. There's no one in the world that doesn't have something difficult in their life to deal with. What is it I guess that makes some people more resilient than others?*

*‘Li’*

Li has worked in a family support team for fifteen year with families where longer-term interventions are required. She described how certain interactions she witnessed or experienced with families had the effect of *‘pushing my buttons’* serving as ‘triggers’ (Morrison 2008) which evoked memories of her own frightening childhood experiences with an aggressive father:

*...I can see my dad shouting at me or I can see my mum being subject to domestic violence and seeing her as the victim, which I **can’t bear** [Li places emphasis on these words]...*

I noticed how Li was a participant who communicated her subjective experiences through quite visual language, and it made me pause to think about the emotional effects of visual images, in the way that the impact of an image may be 'immediate and powerful even when its precise meaning remains, as it were, vague, suspended - numinous' (Rose 2012: 153). I wondered if psychodynamic processes, such as counter-transference, are sometimes more easily expressed through metaphorical or image inspiring language; making difficult emotional responses somehow more tangible. Li acknowledged her own experiences of counter-transference as we talked about her relationships with a single mother. She recalled the stresses of bringing up her children on her own, evoking her own feelings of being a victim;

*... I can see the single parent who’s been, [pauses] who’s struggling and fighting for everything for their children - then I can see myself.*

Li’s sharing of her personal experiences of the job invoked for me a number of responses. Sometimes I felt a sense of palpable relief, a feeling I identified as somewhat cathartic as she so openly explained her own raw distress at these feelings in relation to her work. Although showing what working with child protection can be like at times was the reason for sharing her experiences in the research, I was fearful the consequence would be to make her, and other social workers, look like they were unable to gain appropriate emotional distance from families. However, although this complex ‘expressive’ dimension (Ferguson 2004) to child protection social work practice may seem incongruent to an observer, such raw feelings are important to acknowledge, so that they can be managed more

effectively. Li's way of describing her work is explored in greater detail in chapter five in relation to identifying and evidencing emotional abuse.

Li suggested she had found the space to recognise the psychodynamic processes she experiences during the job. She said she had explored the more intense instances of counter-transference or mirroring either in a therapeutic relationship initiated outside work, in supervision sessions, or with trusted friends and peers. The coherent and unhesitating way in which she recalled these examples suggested to me she was familiar and comfortable with talking about these emotional responses to demonstrate her capacity to use herself in her work.

Over the years Li felt her confidence to share more personal information about her own life experiences and interpersonal relationships has grown and supported her to be more resilient on a day-to-day basis. Evidence suggests that social workers who take opportunities in education and in their daily work to safely share their innermost feelings increase their capacity for resilience (Rajan-Rankin 2013) and potentially use them more effectively in conjunction with the more formal assessment tools of the job. A social worker's own internal emotional world plays an important role in defining motivation and therefore levels of engagement in everyday work with families and other professionals. Their inner world is embedded in their experience of every day practice: 'Emotions do not have an impact on social life - they constitute social life itself' (Gergen 1994 cited in Burkitt 1997: 41).

### *'Leon'*

The emotions participants experienced in relation to their work were not always explicitly expressed. How each social worker felt about their work was indicated in many different ways. Leon has been a social worker for a year. He was keen to take part in the research and to have the opportunity to talk about his cases and to explore his practice. Leon was less direct about sharing details about his own childhood. He preferred to talk abstractly and hypothetically about the importance of 'family values'. He spoke about caring about his own family unit, and wanted to support the families he worked with as a social worker to improve their communication and behaviour towards one another. He talked about the concept of risk when discussing his focus on family values; that he thought it possible he might

not give due attention to the detrimental effects of keeping a child at home when it might be better for them to be removed. Leon contextualised his approach to his work within more generalised discussion about maintenance of the family unit and how his preference for keeping family members together influenced his practice.

*...I value family life and I have to keep it in check because I might be more influenced to kind of work to keep families together or more empathetic to certain situations and sometimes I worry should I be doing that, that's difficult but I think that I should be working to that but not failing to see what the risks are...*

Leon responded to probes about factors that influence his practice by discussing knowledge acquired from training opportunities. It seemed to me that his relatively newly qualified status as a social worker meant that much of what he had learned was still fresh in his mind and perhaps served to demonstrate his competence. When Leon said '*failing to see the risks*' I recalled Laming's report about Victoria Climbié's death. He was concerned about the risks to the child, but I wondered if he was expressing inherited anxiety from previous, well publicised social work examples of failure. He was keen to acknowledge his awareness of and defend his ability to reflect on missing apparently obvious risks.

Talk about child harm alongside the need to reflect on personal experiences is such common conversational currency amongst social workers that it is easy to become detached from the people involved. During interviews with Leon I thought he had all the 'knowledge' and 'talk' suitable for convincing me that he was a competent social worker. When the interview was actually happening I was conflicted about whether he was 'contained' in the most effective way. I felt a mixture of disappointment and guilt as I began to mentally discard his interview; this was one I could not really get 'under the surface' of as he was not open to discussing psychosocial aspects of his practice. I felt guilty for slipping into what I recognised as a hunger for data.

I listened to the interview several months later with some distance from the need to collect data. I began to explore the forms a defended position can take and I more readily recognised Leon's anxieties, and my own defended responses. Perhaps the setting of the interview had become pressurised for Leon. As I searched for ways into the data, he may have felt under the spotlight. I reflected on a discussion we had at the start of the interview about being audio recorded, and the way in which



he glanced at the tape-recorder during the following hour. I had minimised the level of accountability he felt to represent himself well during the interview. We both discussed the seriousness of the work with the detachment of people who perhaps preferred the safety of studying of it to the reality of working with it.

## RELATIONSHIP BASED PRACTICE. EXPLORING EMPATHY AND REFLEXIVITY: 'FIONA'

Interviews with Fiona were interesting to me as she used the interview space as an opportunity to explore her own practice reflectively and address the emotional aspects of her job that the normal working day did not allow for. Fiona has worked in a duty and assessment team for around five years since qualifying, investigating reports of possible harm and assessing whether further work with the family and children is required. Fiona decided to discuss a case she had been recently sent out to investigate that was 'fresh' in her mind. Although her key concern was the lack of emotional warmth and availability of the children's mother, she struggled with explaining exactly why this was. Other abusive aspects of the case were easier to evidence, in particular the physical violence:

*So it feels sometimes that from a professional point of view that you're looking for something else to focus on so you can evidence it and just hope that the emotional stuff gets addressed alongside. And that doesn't feel nice, you know? It feels we're missing the point. God, that sounds so depressing, I'm so sorry.*

Fiona often seemed apologetic about how strongly she felt about being unable to do her best for the families she worked with, and it seemed useful to look closely at this particular experience and think about her emotional reactions to it. When she said 'Sorry', I felt sorry too: sorry for her, for the children she felt she was failing, and for myself, because I recognised her experiences in my own.

The following is a lengthy extract from around two-thirds of the way through the first interview. It is one of the longer extracts in this thesis, included here because it demonstrates Fiona's reflective process, and my subsequent analysis of it.

**(I: INTERVIEWER)**

**I: I know we've been sat here for a while ... it was just about that sort of...how you're feeling about things, how that impacts on how you're working on things and I know that's something you mentioned before and that was quite interesting.**

**Fiona:** *In terms of a particular case or just everything that goes on around?*

**I: I suppose in terms of emotional abuse; like how perhaps your anxiety ... I've got this picture of you looking through the letterbox for an hour at these children and how that makes you feel or how that makes you deal with the case. Because you've been able to be really empathetic towards this mother when really you must have just been thinking 'what the hell...'?**

**Fiona:** *I'm empathetic about it now, I wasn't at the time. I wasn't and I was really cross, really cross and I think I was shocked by it. And it was, it was disbelief of how and why and you know. And I did have to take a step back and reflect on that and, yeah, maybe I can look and say, "Maybe I shouldn't have been so cross, maybe that wasn't professional." Maybe I should have just been calm and not said how I feel and ... I did say how it was, I said, "Your children were ... you didn't get up for your children." It was sort of, yeah... There were so many other things going on in that flat as well that I was cross about that ... I know that there is something about her not responding to her children that caused the pit of my stomach to ... and that's how I still feel about it. It is ... and although that's there I'm trying to get everyone to picture what that's like for those children. I also know I need to be mindful that it was just a point in time and that there are, you know, positives as well.*

*But for me at that time I don't know whether I'd behave differently if I saw that again, I don't. And...I still feel that I'm... justified in feeling cross on those children's behalf. Maybe I shouldn't have made that quite so obvious [small laugh]. But I still feel justified in feeling that way and letting mum know that that isn't okay. (I: mmm) And her children deserve more than that and she is the one that should be giving it to them. I'm not for one minute trying to say that I could do a better job, I want her to know that she should be doing that job. And that's what her children require. And, you know I hope I put that across (I: mmm).*

*But, yeah, and I've still got that in my stomach, I still feel that now. And maybe that will lessen once conference ... I don't know. Maybe that will lessen. But, yeah, that really, really ...*

**I: That physical reaction to it...**

*Fiona: Yeah and, I'll be honest, I dealt with it when I got back to the office by laughing about ... [sighs] I'm not going to say. But ... [laughs]. The child had...poo all up her hand and all on her, and she wanted to play with my hair. And I didn't let her. But, you know, there are those ... you sort of have to protect yourself I guess. Really there's that overwhelming, 'ahh, let me look after you', but you need to remain that sort of ... it's mum's job to do that, I'm not their mum. I'm there to help their mum and their mum wants to be doing those things and they need to see their mum, a carer, I'm saying mum because it was mum there, you know. But there's that, 'oh just let me look after you.' So, yeah, it's ...*

**I: Is that needing the distance for your own sanity, or for your physical wellbeing, or you don't want to be covered in this child's poo?**

*Fiona: [Laughs] Maybe be a bit of both. No, because if a child came up and gave me a hug I would ... you know, you do have to be so careful, don't you, that you're not on in a situation where, you know...somebody can make an allegation, I guess. But, yeah, it is that professional stuff and that's what I want to be able to articulate, those feelings professionally. And I struggle ... especially...and I know now I'm still feeling emotional about it and it is difficult -*

**I: Yeah, I can tell.**

*Fiona: It is difficult.*

**I: But that's normal.**

*Fiona: Yeah, I guess.*

**I: Well, I think it's normal. But we won't try and talk about what normal is!**

*Fiona: [laughs] Yeah. And I think you have to manage it, don't you? And in a professional way you do but...I think if your colleagues and your manager can at least empathise with how that is for me, which isn't the most important thing, but at least if I can have a bit ... 'you do get what I'm feeling, don't you?' Then that helps me manage it for the*

family. And (**I: hmmm**) I think in this particular case when a particular professional [sighs] isn't being as open to how I'm feeling that probably does impact on me being defensive. And I know I need to then have my manager or somebody sort of you know, level that... '...Don't need to be defensive, it's fine, people can have their own views.' [Sighs/laughs] and you know...

**I: But it's hard to have your ... if you're putting yourself out there and trying to explain through, showing, demonstrating your own feelings, to have, to be shut down ...**

Fiona: Yeah.

**I: I guess, ho...how does your defensiveness, kind of,...how does it show itself? Do you get...**

Fiona: [quietly] I sent it in an email [laughs]...no, it wasn't huge [laughs]! but you know and I guess I then feel like I'm justifying why something is happening. And I know full well that I justified that in a ... I, I still feel completely justified [louder] in what's happened, that doesn't take away from how I feel emotionally about what's happened. Yeah, I think we've done all the right things to tick all the right boxes. I think those children's emotions should be above that. And I don't think they are. I think we're ticking boxes to say we're doing the right thing for targets. And that's my frustration. And I know there's nothing I can do about it right at this time and we do have to tick those boxes, I just want it known that actually that's what's happening. And that's why those decisions were made. And I think it's important that that's recognised because I was the one that was there. And I'm meant to be from the voice of the child, then listen to my voice. If the children are clearly not being heard then that's what I'm there for. So that can be hard. But maybe, like I say, in a few months I'll look back and think, maybe I misinterpreted that. But yeah ...

**I: Sounds like you've got strong....certainty.**

Fiona: Yeah.

**I: It is good to be able to look back, its part of professional development to look back and sort of reflect. And mostly you do what you thought was right at the time and distance tells you...you still would have made the same decision but obviously with a bit of distance you're going to feel differently and respond in a slight more considered way.**

*Fiona: [laughs] Yes.*

***I: But then it's...if you were to shut off from how you feel then you're going to ... I mean it could be argued that if you shut off from those gut reactions, like that feeling in your stomach and your crossness [Fiona: yes] with the mother then perhaps you're going to miss what it's really like for them.***

*Fiona: Yeah, exactly.*

***I: And running around unattended like that.***

*Fiona: Yeah, indeed. Bless them, but they are cute kids.*

During the analysis of all the interviews I followed the suggested stages of Doucet and Mauthner's (2008) 'Listening guide' to build a tiered framework for the analysis of the interviews. During my first 'listening to' the transcripts of interviews with Fiona I looked for any common themes. This extract was of interest to me because the process of trying to prove emotional abuse had been difficult for Fiona, and she felt that other professionals assessed that emotional abuse was not the main priority. I thought I had sensed Fiona's anxieties about the 'letter box children' but I was did not want to make any assumptions. I wanted to clarify whether we had similar understandings about her responses to the situation, thereby checking out her 'meaning-frame' (Hollway and Jefferson 2013).

I 'named' what I perceived to be Fiona's anxiety in my question by suggesting she was concerned whilst also being scared. Fiona responded by saying that at the time she had felt cross, shocked and distressed. Some days had passed by the time of the interview and she says she felt 'empathetic' towards the mother. She reflected on whether her emotional response to the situation was proportionate. She felt she had carried out her social work duties, but remained troubled about her emotional reaction and the decisions she had made. She questioned if she was being fair to the mother, and justified in seeking a better situation for the children. Fiona wondered if with some distance from her 'cross' feelings and reactions she might have responded differently.

In 'reading for relationships' (Mauthner and Doucet 1998) in this text, I noted that Fiona had developed a relationship with the children in the short but intense period she communicated through the letterbox with them. As she reassured and comforted them she assumed the role of their 'corporate parent'. Whilst 'reflecting

in action' (Schon 1983), Fiona knew she couldn't express her distress in not being able to reach her newly acquired but abandoned children. She recognised it was her role to reduce the risk of any harm coming to the children but she feared that displays of intuitive feelings to create intimacy with the children and display protective anger at the 'real' mother could be judged as unprofessional. Getting too close could have the possible repercussion of an 'allegation'. Her fear of concerns about 'allegations' provoked by embracing a child could be viewed as a conflict between her professional identity and her impulses. In considering her responses, it is possible to explore her 'intersectional identities' (Wetherall 2008: 78) within the context of the assessment of this family. Fiona is a social worker, an agent of the state, under scrutiny to do the 'right' thing, and in this situation she simultaneously felt responsible for the children. She experienced protective and authoritative feelings, blurring the boundaries and recreating them through her empathy and reflective practice.

Following the interview, I mentioned that I had named the case in my notes the 'letter box children.' Fiona commented that she had referred to them as the 'frozen-sausage children' when she talked to her colleagues about them. This was because another factor in the situation was they had been so hungry they were trying to eat sausages straight from the freezer. I wondered later about this shared approach we had to categorising what our defining moment of children's abuse is represented by. Crystallising our experiences of their pain in a label is perhaps a uniting factor in the way in which meaning is created for some social workers in 'doing' the work.

Fiona's need to place some distance between her and the case is indicated by how she talked about the situation. She trailed off from talk about the overwhelming need to take care of the children to reassert that it is the mother's job to do that; and at the end of the extract she refers in a quite disengaged way to the 'cute kids', which I took to indicate that she has no more to say about them. Fiona said she felt the need to create space and maintain 'boundaries' with the children in order to retain 'professional distance'. This was so that parent-child-social worker relationships do not become blurred, and also for more practical, hygiene reasons. I took this section of data to a doctoral group analysis session soon after the interview to help me to process the content of the interview. Members of the group

commented on this 'ending' and the oddly abrupt disengagement from what had been such an involved account.

During subsequent listenings in the following months I wondered about the need for Fiona at that point to establish a more defended position. This was perhaps in reaction to an additional unspoken fear for her emotional and physical wellbeing in the relationship she had formed with the children. There was also perhaps some guilt at recognising her own need to protect herself. Or, there could have simply been a need to signify an end to using any more of her energy on this particular case. Throughout the interviews with Fiona she seemed to be quite self-critical and appeared to blame herself for feeling strong emotions. When I reflected on my own similar frustrations at not being able to do more, I wondered if Fiona was exasperated at her high level of emotional investment, and at not being able to step away from work as easily as she would like.

Fiona's approach to relationship-based practice and her reflective stance are 'inextricably interconnected' (Ruch 2005b: 111). There are many layers to how she felt about the mother, the children, her understandings of other professionals' expectations of her, and how she responded to the whole situation. Fiona regularly paused to check out the possibility of other reactions she could have given, comparing her stance in relation to other professionals who had alternative agendas. She mentioned later that other agencies did not consider the case immediately concerning as although the mother could not be roused from her bed, there was an adult was in the house.

*Fiona: And that's really difficult for other people to see when it's written down, I think people lose sight of what that is like for those two little ones with nobody addressing their needs. And it's like, but they were in the house, so they're not neglected, are they? They're not abandoned. But they're crying and nobody's going to them, nobody's given them a drink or food or ... they are not having their needs met. And I guess it's more neglectful but ...*

**I:        *It's emotional neglect?***

*Fiona: And that really, yeah, and I am struggling with people, some other professionals that ... I don't know, maybe I am thinking too deeply about it but it's like that's lost a bit. It's like, well, you know, what are you saying sort of thing. I don't see why you're not seeing what I see, they didn't*

*have anyone there for them. Yeah, they were locked in the...they weren't locked in but the mum was there but she didn't get up to them.*

Fiona referred to 'other professionals' who did not perhaps see the missed needs of the children in the same way she did. She described her distress at trying to accurately report the emotionally abusive aspects of the situation and tried to recreate in concrete evidential terms the harmful experience of the children that she had witnessed and intervened with. She found it hard to justify.

I used supervision time to explore these reflections and incorporate them in my analysis. An action point from a supervision record on 21 January 2014, reads:

*Gemma to give some extra thought to what it was that Fiona might not have been saying during her interview - what might she have defended herself against saying to herself/acknowledging, let alone what she did not want to say to Gemma (psychosocial notion of the defended self).*

In going back to the previous section of her interview, Fiona said her frustration at this manifested itself in defensive practice. She said she 'sent it in an email...', trailing off, laughing and speaking slightly inaudibly. Thinking about this audible withdrawal from the conversation in relation psychosocial defences led this to indicate to me that she wanted to gloss over the frustration and distress this was causing her, as well as her discomfort at the detaching effect of sending her concerns in an email. Fiona seemed despondent about the dismissive response she received when she tried to speak on behalf of the children. Her decision-making about the situation was closely bound by a need to draw back and think about the wider professional support network and how her decision-making could not be made according to her personal feelings. It was possible she felt it was necessary to show equal empathy to the mother as to the children, but it is interesting that Fiona uses the term '*empathetic*' about her newer feelings for the mother rather just 'feeling sorry for her'. This seems quite a deliberate term, as if to objectify her emotions by selecting a word, which expresses a more 'appropriate' emotion.

Empathy is not just a feeling process, but a thinking process (Hochschild 1993; Theodosius 2006). It is a quality regarded as integral to the social work role, and includes being able to understand a parent's own unmet needs and respond



accordingly. It is possible that on reflection Fiona managed her emotions in order to match the perceived expectations of her role. By working through her anger Fiona created a space for empathy to grow for the mother. Once Fiona reflected, she contained her feelings and was able to think about the mother, and this enabled her to be empathic rather than sympathetic.

It is also possible that Fiona had no choice but to distance herself from her involved feelings about the case, as other agencies suggested a placatory response was more appropriate. Repressing her anger could mean that those feelings had to be projected out somewhere else, or that another feeling was needed in order to push those 'inappropriate' responses down. Fiona, however, recognised that this emotional process was an unhelpful one and used the opportunity of talking to me to reflect about the case: to deal with the feelings rather than deny them. There is an expectation for social workers to use their reflective abilities to develop clear emotional boundaries to ensure that 'healthy empathetic concern does not spill over into empathetic distress' (Kinman and Grant 2011: 271). After a reflective digression, Fiona demonstrated the ability to care whilst avoiding the risk of becoming emotionally over-involved in the world of the family.

The altruism Fiona displayed is perhaps linked to her role of 'corporate parent' and is traditionally associated with social work as it 'has a particular feminised, gendered character' (Baines et al. 2014: 4). Fiona could see no alternative but to take on the role of 'carer through the letter-box', until the children were removed to safety. The other professionals who were involved regarded the unsupervised children as a reduced cause for concern as technically an adult was present in the home. They were, perhaps, far enough removed from the situation by their differing role of police officer or doctor to be able to separate themselves from caring responsibilities. It is conceivable to go a step further than simply calling Fiona a 'corporate parent', and define her behaviour as that of a 'corporate mother'.

In discussing my researcher positioning I considered that my gender is of significance in doing this research as social work is considered to be a 'feminised' profession (Baines et al. 2014) I thought back to my experiences of child protection work and the expectation I felt upon me that as a social worker who has the role of monitoring other people's parenting, I should be able to demonstrate how it should be done. Fiona's behaviour reflects the 'naturalised but entirely socially constructed,

selfless sacrifice assumed from mothers and other female caregivers in the community and home' (Baines et al. 2014, 2). This sense of responsibility perhaps adds another dimension to her anger at the children's mother. Fiona may have felt she has had no choice but to take on her duty of care for the children, even though she could not physically reach them. If Fiona had arrived at the family home at the end of the working day, it is unlikely she would have 'clocked off' and dealt with it tomorrow. She expressed a moral responsibility to wait until she judged the children were safe. The kind of caring duties that social workers take on go beyond what is expected of employees in other jobs. This can, at times, make significant demands on the individual social worker's capacity to care. The professional role can also become a very personal one.

My position as a researcher concerned me during analysis of this interview, and caused me to pause and think about the role I assumed during interviews. I noticed, for example that I affirmed and reassured, perhaps too much. Fiona sought reassurance from me in her verbal and non-verbal communications, and I met these requests with empathy and affirmation. This can be seen when I tell her '*that's normal*', and when I summarised what I believe she had told me at the end of the extract. Of course, in order to elicit in-depth responses, it is important to show that the interview space is a safe and empathic one. Therefore my line of enquiry, my approach, and my responses are infused with my own experiences of the challenging nature of the work. However, my identity as a researcher and a social worker at times led the direction the interviews took, rather than the interviewee leading them.

My own need to highlight how emotional abuse can slip off the radar when evidence and legal recourse is sought became clear to me on later readings of the transcript, when I clarified to Fiona the term '*emotional neglect*' rather than being a passive listener to her narrative. On listening back I focused on the mother's emotional neglect rather than her broader neglect of the children's needs for drink and food. In questioning whether I demonstrated 'enough distance' from Fiona, I considered the complex meaning-making act of 'identification' (Weatherell 2008: 74). During Fiona's telling of her work I felt transported back into the role of a social worker, and imagined what it felt like to be looking through the letterbox at the children. I think the identity I assumed as a social worker during the interview was

reflected in the way I validated her feelings of distress. The panel analysis group confronted me with some uncomfortable insights that I had to take into consideration; such as judgments of my own social work practice and the reasons for wanting to interrogate it; perhaps validation of my own approaches to work with emotional abuse.

*‘Second level’ panel analysis of Fiona’s practice*

I decided to carry out a second level of data collection in the form of a panel analysis, and included a piece of data I gathered from an interview with Fiona. I thought that I identified more readily with Fiona than with other participants and by sharing the data I hoped to guard against ‘wild analysis’ (Hollway and Jefferson 2013). I wondered if I was perhaps over-empathising with Fiona’s struggles and missing some more obvious insights. It was my intention to test out what ‘outsiders’ thought about the short excerpts. I held a research analysis group with four MA social work students, offering them three short quotes from three different sources, one of which included Fiona’s fear about moving children around. I asked them the broad questions: ‘What is going on?’, ‘What are your reactions?’ and ‘Does this deepen your understanding of work with emotional abuse?’

The panel’s more general conversation about the quotes focused on whether the social workers were demonstrating good practice, and on defining what the role of the social worker ought to be. They looked at a short quote taken from the first interview with Fiona, which I had chosen in part because her experiences resonated with my own. She spoke about having to move children from foster home to foster home because of circumstances such as procedure and availability of foster carers:

*....but what I’m worried about from what the local authority are doing is that we’re moving the children from one set of parents to another set of parents and we’re about to move them again to someone else before they move again to wherever that may be. And I question whether that’s more emotional harm and if there is another way we could manage that.*

*I don’t know the answer, I don’t know whether there is...but it does play on my mind that these are little babies and we’re moving them around like they’re luggage.*

This section of the interview sparked debate. Fiona described ‘the local authority’ as the problem in her continual moving of children from home to home, but the students seemed quite conflicted about her comments, responding with frustration at her apparent helplessness. Wesley described her as ‘passive’ and Becca deemed her to be ‘defeated’. They felt it was Fiona’s duty as a social worker to confront the local authority if she felt she was doing something harmful to the children as a consequence of the job. I was surprised and uncomfortable about the

level of criticism expressed. Having empathised with Fiona's reflections, I too was also indirectly criticised by the panel. If Fiona was defeated and passive in her work, perhaps I was too. I found myself justifying Fiona's position to the group, reiterating that I found the social workers I interviewed to be experienced and reflective practitioners. Following my input, the group fed back that such small segments of the data did not provide the bigger picture, that there was no real context offered as background for the comments. Becca decided, on balance, she would prefer to work with Fiona than other, less reflective workers. The group concluded overall that dealing with emotions was a good thing, but they remained unimpressed by the level of competence displayed by the social workers quoted. Perhaps it is the cases that in a similar way that a parent becomes overloaded with their anxieties and loses capacity to manage their parenting duties (Fonagy and Allison 2012), a social worker can also become anxiously preoccupied and feel less able to function when they are required to act protectively.

After ruminating on the emergence of my own defenses in this situation, I considered the notion of passivity that is often related to parents by social workers who are deemed not to be acting protectively enough towards their children. It could be suggested that the students regarded Fiona as a parent, appointed by the state, who was not behaving in an assertive enough way. Previous research indicates that parents labeled as 'passive' tend to be women (Holland 2000). Perhaps Fiona's more maternal approach to the work was regarded as overly emotional and unprofessional. I also wondered if Fiona's gender had been less apparent, whether the reactions to her comment would have been different. Or maybe a more rational approach would have been considered more appropriate by the panel.

It is the case that social workers are expected to exhibit 'accurate' levels of empathy (Grant 2014a) and do their jobs with authority. There was a discomfort amongst the panel about Fiona's emotional response, and the extent to which her level of empathy was appropriate provoked discussion. Portrayals of social workers in the media or in social work literature are not generally associated with fear. Social work professionals are not typically regarded as vulnerable subjects, who show distress or become victims of 'social suffering' (Frost and Hoggett 2008). I wondered if Fiona's 'defeated' stance provoked anxious defensive mechanisms in

the students. They did not want to see a qualified social worker as disenfranchised and could not consequently show her compassion.

The panel participants were close to qualifying and under scrutiny themselves. The tone of the group was perhaps influenced by their stage of professional development. Some fear may have been evoked and the need for control emerged as they themselves headed towards full time statutory social work. It was easier to label Fiona, who exposed her troubling and unresolved feelings, as weak rather than accepting these unattractive qualities as a possible aspect of the work. Perhaps the feeling that we cannot bear to acknowledge in ourselves we locate in others (Cooper 2012), making them easier to rationalise and dismiss. The panel's responses could also be construed as an act of counter-transference, as they re-directed their anxieties about being able to do a good job themselves towards Fiona. They may have been keen to perceive themselves as energetic and proactive in prioritising the needs of the child. The 'helping' social worker does not 'make mistakes, be weak, fearful or demanding' (Burke 1998 cited in Morrison 2008: 261). They perhaps needed to dissociate themselves from the potential fear of not being able to do a good job.

The thoughts and feelings Fiona shared with me bypassed the official assessment tools of the job, and reflected her inner anxieties about the work. I was grateful to Fiona for being candid about her feelings as, although most social workers feel strong emotional responses at some point, these are often hidden, as there is often a significant anxiety of being exposed as unprofessional. To present oneself as unobjective and emotional brings the risk 'of being caught out in the eyes of another person, seen more clearly by someone else than we can see ourselves' (Cooper 2012: 3).

The panel analysis group revealed to me the alarm that can be felt in reaction to the exposed emotions of a social worker. This led me to consider what happens to the individual and the profession when thoughts and feelings are considered wrong, and they are suppressed or filtered. If there is 'a degree of deception between what the individual really feels and what they are supposed to feel' (Theodosius 2006: 896), where do the unsaid and unsayable emotions (Hollway and Froggett 2012) like anger, fear, shame and guilt reside?

During evidence-gathering it is possible to ignore information that does not corroborate an initial hunch (Munro 2011). If social workers are not fully aware of, or repress, their distressing emotional reactions to a situation, they run the risk of neglecting the important act of processing them. One possible outcome of this omission is that they may be compelled to seek out evidence that verifies their initial feelings and suspicion. In connection to this, is the concern that the most significant source of stress for child protection professionals is a culture where common emotional responses to work are regarded as inappropriate (Morrison 1997). This research suggests that the expression and acknowledgement of the less desirable aspects of doing child protection work requires attention during reflective processes so that social workers can engage in other aspects of their work, such as evidence gathering, more effectively. The following section examines in closer detail the psychoanalytic concept of splitting in relation to work with emotional abuse.

### *Splitting from the 'bad' system*

A theme emerged during the categorisation of the interview data of social workers making reference to the higher, oppressive force of 'the local authority': 'the department' or 'the system'. A trend identified was of practitioners splitting themselves, as the well-meaning worker, from the bad organisation. Fiona had spoken of her powerlessness in her role, as a kind of instrument of the local authority, whose approach to children who needed a new home was '*moving them around like they're luggage*'. In doing this she felt that she was being emotionally abusive. When social workers described the difficult aspects of the job, they described trying to balance out their role of simultaneously being a helper, but also a figure of authority, making difficult decisions that may impact significantly on families for the 'greater good'. Theresa described feeling as if she was fighting a losing battle for the children she worked with, and the enemy was her own unsympathetic employer.

*I don't always feel the department understands the level of work you try to put in place. And I've had to carve that myself. I've had to work out myself really how, what is best for the boys whilst I feel I'm being mandated to some degree, my hands are tied because the court has*

*been quite clear. How do you support two young boys who are basically saying they don't want to see dad? And actually all the evidence would suggest that the last contacts they've had with dad have been emotionally quite abusive with the boys.*

I have underlined phrases where the language Theresa used seemed to powerfully describe her lack of control, suggesting a relationship with the department that was uncommunicative and coercive. She perceived her role as to perform a part of a dysfunctional system. I returned to her earlier comment about her motivation to be an advocate for children, because when she was a child, *'if only I'd had a person that would listen to me'*. Being in the position of a silenced representative may have been painfully difficult for her to bear.

Many social workers debated how useful they were being. In certain situations they would feel they were making things worse, but were unable to do things differently. Vicky, a social worker of four years, explained how this occurred when she tried to elicit information from children to form evidence of a case of sexual abuse.

*I always think with children that like you've got to talk to them about sexual abuse they've experienced, I always feel like I'm being really emotionally abusive to them because often children.... all you want to do is just kind of say 'I know what you're talking about, you don't have to say anymore.' But instead you have to keep pushing them, 'well what was it?' 'where do you use it...?' 'I know it's really difficult but please...', you know...?*

There were situations where getting support for children who were experiencing emotional abuse was challenging as the harm did not seem to present a significant and immediate enough risk to warrant interventions. Social worker Sky reported feeling sneaky as she tried to 'work around' the system. She reported making an emotionally abusive situation sound worse than it was, or focusing on other elements of abuse in order to secure resources.

*It's similar to the way in that you have to reach certain thresholds in order to get certain services, isn't it? So if, if a case is on the cusp. Say with emotional abuse, for example, you know, you need to kind of up the ante a little bit and get them on a plan. "Once they're on a plan, I'll get this, this, this." That's abusive, isn't?*

Social workers shared these feelings with me in a confessional and despondent way. Reading this collection of quotes together I am struck by the amount of guilt for their own behaviour, that the social workers I interviewed carry around with them and often repress. The repetitious pattern of the instance in which this



occurred during interviews indicated to me the kind of splitting process that repeatedly occurs as social workers try to reconcile the good and bad aspects of the job. Often positioning their intentions as a 'pure' force in opposition to an unresponsive and uncaring 'system', a defence mechanism against their anxiety and conflicted emotions. Organisational structures do not necessarily support the work of social workers as well as they might, and it is often tempting 'to settle for blaming "the system" in some way, rather than entering an active engagement with it' (Cooper 2010: 242).

The nature of working within child protection systems with its pressures of times and resources means that sometimes superficial solutions may be presented to deal with complex occurrences of emotional abuse. The building of trusting relationship, which can take time, may only be formed at a surface level (Cooper 2012). Even when relationships are given time to develop, social workers may harbor difficult feelings in relation to the challenging work they are undertaking. The act of splitting possibly allowed Fiona and others, to get on with difficult tasks that at times felt out of control. Splitting in social work practice can perform a useful containing function in allowing some distance from a painful experience whilst still maintaining a connection with it (Cooper 2010).

#### USE OF EVIDENCE BASED PRACTICE: 'TOM'

Tom has been a social worker for six years and was different to some of the other social workers interviewed, such as Fiona, in that he spoke very confidently about his practice. He used language from the psychosocial literature: talking about anxieties and '*understanding your process*'. He felt he was able to identify and present evidence of emotional abuse in a way that the families and other practitioners were very '*receptive*' to accepting.

**I:** ***It sounds like, as you're speaking, that you have a good relationship with these particular people, is that something that you find important?***

**Tom:** *Yes, I think it's, I realised quite young in my career that things that that were stressing me the most was I wasn't transparent with families. When I knew that we had a plan but we couldn't tell the parents, or whatever, and I found that unfair, I found that difficult to hold on to all of that*

*myself, and I found by just being completely honest with the families about everything it makes my intervention a lot more effective because they know there's no game playing. They know that they can trust what I have to say because I will tell them exactly what I think as I think it. I think that helps build the trust because firstly they see a social worker as a local authority, and I'm just there to take their kid off them. By explaining your thought process, by explaining what you're doing and why you're doing it and the basis for what you're making your decisions, they learn to trust that and accept that. And I find longer term they can take ownership over that themselves so that I don't need to. That's where the best outcomes happen. The worst outcome is when the trust breaks down, when they feel that they can't trust what you say. So even parents where I go, I remove the kids from their care, for the vast majority of them I'm still, during that process, the adversarial court process, on talking terms, talking relationship with, and there's very little ... I don't have much animosity vs. me compared to what I used to when I first came in to the job. That's really effective, and that's just by being completely honest.*

***I: Yes, so it's that, kind of, that's the strength in it, being, actually taking a step, the risk, of just putting out there something that someone's not going to like hearing, is what actually, it actually develops the relationship.***

***Tom: Because more often or not, and it's true with children as well as adults is, the anxiety we feel about telling someone something is more our anxiety than it is theirs because the chances are it's what they think anyway and they're just waiting for us to verbalise.***

***I: Yes, interesting, and you mentioned, you mentioned using evidence and research. Is that something that's important to you and your practice?***

***TOM: Absolutely, otherwise I think what we're doing is just making a whole array of judgments and value judgments on a family that's not informed by anything other than a conversation with your manager, or underpinned by anything that's tangible. Especially when you're going in to court to remove a child, for example, you need to be basing what you're saying on something. It gives us a framework. You've got to be clear about how you're using your research, and the research that you use but we need to be informed in what we're doing, because otherwise what we're doing is little better than guess work in my view.***

**I:** ***Do you use theory, any kind of theory, for example attachment theory, is that something that you'd bring into this?***

**Tom:** *Yes, I think you have to when you're looking at, for example, sitting down with families and you're talking to them about what's going on. Things like, for example, attachment theory, families do get, when you frame it in the right way, but I find the more biological explanations for what's going on. Using neurobiology, limited in its application because there's an awful lot we don't know, and I think the way that we've been encouraged to use it, over the last few years, isn't the right application to it, because I don't think we're there yet. But just on a very basic level, about some of the stuff, we know how babies' brains function, how teenagers' brains function, bringing that into it is really useful. Again, I come back to, for example, cumulative harm, that's a theory I find with parents works really effectively, you sit down with a chronology and you show them, and say, 'This is the impact the cumulative impact, of all these behaviours on your child, and that's why your child is the way he is now, because, you know, he's kicking off every 30 seconds because he's never had that emotional support and time with you. And the negative, you know, attention, is better than no attention at all. What you can see is from your kids is you're behaving really badly. Let's change the approach, let's make it more positive, and then actually, the child's negative behaviour is reduced.' And if you can show them the timeline of that, it's like, wow. That's why, because it bring them out of their forest, takes them a step back out of their lives so they can look into it. I find that really effective.*

Tom described using neurobiological theory and cumulative impact to explain the harm caused by parental behaviour. He preferred to use EIP, which might be more popularly regarded as 'hard' proof, over professional judgments or the use of models or theories. Tom engaged in 'rituals of accountability' (Wesselink and Pearce 2015: 6), which might be less easily disputed. Although EBP has been adapted from a medical model and in this research is redefined as EIP for social work purposes, 'evidence' is a concept originating in the law, and constitutes 'giving an account which is admissible in court' (Wesselink and Pearce 2015: 11). This is a useful approach in certain contexts, especially legal settings, where chronological evidence of harm combined with scientific reasoning offers explanations that add a sense of legitimacy and rationality to a case. In terms of presenting a 'hierarchy of evidence' (Wesselink and Pearce 2015:10), information that appears to be based

on medical data is more persuasive as evidence of potential harm. A critique of what, for example, looks like 'bad' parenting is a more accessible area to participate in than disputing the authority of neurobiology, which professionals and families alike are generally less well equipped to do.

There are drawbacks, however, to the effectiveness of using this approach directly with parents, particularly when they are in crisis. How truly receptive are parents to receiving this approach: would it impress, intimidate, perhaps silence them, or push them towards passive compliance? I thought back to the way Fiona narrated her experience with the letter-box children to me, of whom I now had a strong visual 'memory'. Fiona's 'style' of working focused more on attuning to the experience of the child. During the interview with Tom, he spoke with empathy about the children he worked with, but I did not have the same strong sense of individual children when he spoke about his cases as I did with Fiona. He spoke of them more to clearly demonstrate a point about abusive parental behaviours, rather than making them pivotal to his narrative.

I was assured of Tom's capability, as his descriptions of how he processed and reflected on troubling cases appeared impressively contained. In my reflective journal I wrote words such as 'pragmatic' and 'self-assured', Tom appeared to compartmentalise so well. Fiona seemed, in comparison, to be self-doubting and in need of reassurance about the choices she made. I found Tom's approach quite business like, and a performance of competence. I recognised the words and theories of Munro, Laming and Ferguson as he re-delivered them to me. I liked and respected Tom, and was grateful to him for volunteering to take part, but I also felt like he was advising me how the job should be done, which I was already aware of and not what I wanted to hear about.

I guiltily scribbled in my journal as the train left the station after the interview about how he seemed to 'have it all sorted'. He didn't see any problems with identifying or evidencing emotional abuse. I became frustrated and reflected on my passivity during the interview, wondering if I had been passively compliant so I could get my data and get out. Tom had told me he was up to date on his research, which made emotional abuse straightforward to work with. His stance was that, if other workers also had the appropriate knowledge and a direct, honest approach to communicating, they too would not struggle. I wondered if I felt inadequate. My

underlying fear was a concern that my research was unnecessary. I had, in part wanted to step away from practice to do some research in order to find out how to define and work with emotional abuse more effectively. Tom had managed this without needing the additional time and space I had.

I took a step back from my own emotional responses, and imagined combining Tom and Fiona into one super-worker with Tom's self-assurance in court and Fiona's sensitive and committed approach to the children. Then I wondered conversely whether perhaps I would create a kind of Frankenstein social worker monster, talking through a letterbox to a disengaged mother about neurobiology. Thinking back to the differences between the pragmatic profession of the law, and the more emotional approach to human interactions of social work, I considered the differences between Tom and Fiona's approaches. Of course, this research is a small scale one and the individuals interviewed were all quite different, but I thought it was possible to identify some differences between Tom's focus on scientific cause and effect, and Fiona's more morally committed response. Neither social worker could be positioned as purely 'knowing' or 'unknowing', but Tom seemed to respond with more evidence informed responses whereas Fiona demonstrated an intuitive and tacit response.

### *An alternative more 'logical' approach to reflective practice*

By the time I interviewed Tom, I had interviewed several social workers who felt they did not have the space to reflect. In the following extract from the first interview with Tom he described how he made space for his own reflective process during his journey home, using his car as a 'mobile office' (Ferguson 2010: 136). This section occurs around two thirds of the way through the interview. I have underlined some key phrases.

***I: Obviously you mentioned reflective practice, is that, I mean, from the way that you're speaking are you using the vocabulary of someone that's very familiar with doing that, and you're reflecting in action and on action. Um, can you describe how you, what your process is if that's?***

*Tom: Well, I'm very fortunate, I've always made the deliberate choice to work far away from where I live.*

*I: Right, okay.*

*Tom: And I usually only work, I won't even work closer than half an hour, because I love my drive. Drive into work, drive home from work. And I use that time, and I made the active decision you know, by the time I get to work, so I leave work and I'm a family man, I've got a wife, I've got children, all the rest of it, I've got my interests, by the time I get to work I've put a new face on, and same on the way back. If I'm upset about something, if I'm furious about it, if something I've seen has upset me, or if I'm haunted by something, I process that and I think about it and I reflect about it on my drive home. I know colleagues frequently, who live in this town, who works in this town, I know a guy in my team who works literally 300 metres down the road, and he says he really, really struggles, just not being able to find that different role and going straight from professional to personal without any barrier or any mechanism in the middle. And that's very difficult for him. Where does he get his time to reflect? He doesn't really, because you don't get much time to do that during a busy day because you're dealing with 30 children in your case load, phone calls every 30 seconds, management, and all the rest. You don't get that. You need to find, I think, your own personal mechanism to be able to do that. I don't think it's something that professionally you're going to get. I know that's not ideal but realistically you're not going to get it from work. You need to find somewhere else where you're going to get that.*

In between the two interviews, I had wondered what to talk to Tom about in the second interview. He had upset my research plans slightly as it seemed as if there was nothing more to say with regards to evidencing emotional abuse. He had declined having a copy of the transcript sent to him as he said he didn't have time to read it. I think I felt embarrassed that my research was so ill conceived.

My thoughts returned to his final words about reflective practice, and considered my lack of challenge to his statements, for example my passive acceptance of his words about reflective space at work.

*You don't get that. You need to find, I think, your own personal mechanism to be able to do that. I don't think it's something that professionally you've going to get. I know that's not ideal but realistically you're not going to get it from work. You need to find somewhere else where you're going to get that.*

As I reflected on this I considered that I had mirrored his acceptance of this and glossed over it, perhaps because these were the messages I had so often heard from social workers. Once he told me that was the way it had to be, I became resigned to it. By mirroring Tom in his acceptance about supervisory arrangements, I may have encouraged his resistance (Jervis 2009) to discussing this during the first interview. I colluded in minimising the importance of supervision and suppressing his fear of not doing a good enough job as a consequence. Chapter six returns to explore the role sources of support play in greater depth.

## WORKING WITH 'THE SYSTEM'

### *What is left unsaid: 'Sean'*

Sean has been a social worker for seven years. When I probed for examples about his work with emotional abuse he said very little specifically about his cases.

*To be honest I haven't really given myself a lot of time to think about it before coming.*

This response was quite different to many of the other social workers, who often came with a case in mind to discuss. This wrong-footed me slightly as Sean struck me as someone who was quite meticulous and a deep thinker. He was the second person I interviewed, and I panicked slightly, wondering if what I was asking of participants was unrealistic. In preparation for the research I had theorised about the methodological framework and moved away from the realities of day-to-day social work practice. I wondered if I had become out of touch or if my questions did not make sense. Sean preferred to talk about his cases more generally:

*But emotional abuse can be harder I guess, yeah, to be very clear about. Just trying to think of my current cases. [pauses] I suppose a lot of it is related to... So many of our cases are about issues between parents and the risks of the children becoming, you know, being exposed to conflict and...yeah, drunken behaviour or, you know, volatile sort of situations. So rather than maybe the parents' behaviour being directed right at the child in an abusive way, it's more just that sense of they're going to be harmed by having to witness all of that and feeling frightened and, you know...*

Sean seemed to run out of things to say about emotional abuse. A reoccurring dilemma he raised was problems with 'the system', which became a theme we discussed during both interviews. I wrote in my journal:

*8/12/13 'System' – personal battle, SW as agent who has to negotiate with constraining rather than enabling system. What is the system? Why doesn't it work? Ideology of it – does it come from earlier notions of welfare models and intervention into family life etc?*

*14/12/13 In relation to 'the system' what kind of agent is each worker – hopeless? views themselves as part of it?*

Upon further reflection it seemed that it was akin to the issue of splitting the good worker from the bad organisation that arose throughout many of the interviews, although Sean led the conversation into examining the impact of the relationship with the system on the social worker and the specifics of their work. In the excerpt below Sean described the difficulty of balancing the dual roles of authority and support in relation to working within a statutory social work setting:

*Yeah, that one in particular I think everyone you know, who sort of worked on it was like 'oh God what a dreadful bloody family to work with', everyone. They are particularly difficult and, yeah, able to get under your skin. And... Yeah. I mean it is difficult I guess because we're trying to play all these different roles. So...because, you know, there's an aspect just, you know, of us, you know, trying to have this sort of kind of enabling an empowering relationship and build that trust as a conduit to them feeling supported and, I don't know, able to make changes. But we're also kind of the lead professional whose doing this monitoring role and managing the care plan, and seeing...you know what I mean? It's quite hard to have those multiple roles I feel sometimes, you know? So maybe it is if you're someone who's just coming in to assess something then it's kind of easier, you don't have to worry about all the other kind of baggage involved in being a social worker. You can just, 'this is what I have to do, this is a discreet piece of work', so...yeah. But yeah, it is tough. I think... I guess that's why people...why there is such a turnover of social workers, because people do just get, yeah, worn down by it and don't feel like the system is very supportive ultimately.*

I tried to make sense of what the notion of 'the system' represented to him.

Towards the end of the second interview I asked Sean about this.

**I:** ***I suppose we've talked about....Who is the system I suppose...?***

**Sean:** *Yeh I dunno I guess it depends how deep you want to go. The way we work as an expression of our social and*



*cultural model that we live all in, the capitalist (coughs) competitive market driven world where you've got to kind of keep up or you're on your own sort of thing. It's not really that same model of social solidarity that you hear about in other cultures where there is more of a sense of no, we are all in this together. It's more a sense of how we bring ourselves to a level rather than, yeh you've got the super rich people and then the rest of us here, and just accepting that's how it is. Well, no actually, it's better, healthier to live where there's less separation, less difference where people aren't stigmatised for being poor and lacking emotional skills and social skills and job skills and all of that you know so I guess the whole system is underpinned by the ideology of our society and that child protection, we're just there to be, to manage those people who can't cope with themselves so well but we're only managing it, we're not trying to change it in a deeper way like I've been saying I guess, it's and only intervening when it's the more extreme harms to children, you know, ummmm....*

Sean described the paternalistic 'top-down' welfare model (Froggett 2008: 87) he felt the child protection system is based on. He highlighted the divisive nature of it, suggesting that interventions are superficial, regarding people as agentless recipients of them. Children and families are not partners in change, they are 'hollow welfare subject(s)' (Froggett 2008: 88). Social work interventions, Sean said are therefore only effective in dealing with 'extreme' situations and do not promote any real change. When Sean said '*change it in a deeper way*' I took this to mean change to the social structure. The implication of Sean's response was that the system he works for, along with his fellow social workers, the employing organisation and the families who have children subject to child protection investigations are all positioned within a dynamic of power relations imposed by the state. People are regarded as incapable of having any real agency (Froggett 2008). This creates hierarchy, and has a filter down effect, compelling individuals from each level, from organisation to worker to client, to operate separately from each other. This is stigmatising and promotes poor relationships.

*..system that tends to be, you know, generate hostility and resistance.*

A key concern for Sean was wondering how to counteract his frustration about the job and the related system, so that he and others did not become jaded by it:

*And I think it's quite easy, and I think social workers do get into being quite negative about the system we're in, you know, complaining and feeling hard done by and resentful.*

I imagined how immobilising and hopeless this scenario could make a person feel. He described a situation, which he mentioned ended in a complaint being made about him by a parent. It led to him being taken off the case:

*...I mean in the end there was a more serious incident where the two children were found out on the street on their own one night and there was a Section 47. And before that we'd been thinking about closing the case because the child, this girl's behaviour at school had improved and been stable for a while, and parents had been more or less as compliant as they could be. But then when this incident happened, then there was a child protection investigation but they also made a complaint about me, and then that led me not to be on the case anymore. (laughs) So it was reallocated and... But then it kind of went into like PLO as well because of that. And then coming out of then there was a decision to have a psychological assessment, and because I talked to the new social worker a couple of times and it does sound like, you know, this is what it needed, I guess. It needed maybe someone with that mandate and that sort of professional expertise maybe, to try and really understand what was going on with the, you know, this girl's attachments and how those had been disrupted or not, or you know, how much I guess the parents' behaviour was exacerbating, you know, or maintaining this behaviour in her. Because I suppose, yeah, as I say there wasn't anything very visible to pin it down to like, you know, yeah you're... I think there was a sense they were quite hard on the child and they would get quite angry with her. And also because it was her behaviour that was creating the anxiety or concern from professionals so that, you know, I was always worried about that; that you know, you can't blame her for this, you know, and don't be telling her off even though I think a lot of that did go on, you know. And she would get to the point of saying she didn't want to see me and then after the next social worker she didn't want to see that person, you know. So it's really sort of horrible to have her feel...put in that position.*

Sean said nothing directly about the impact of the complaint on him. His telling of this situation indicated that he thought the child had been put under pressure from her parents to make the complaint, and the parents were motivated to do this as they were upset by the child protection investigation he had instigated. Sean's narrative suggested there had been no indication he had done something wrong and that he was, essentially, removed from the case unnecessarily. As he spoke about a child saying she didn't want to see him, and then repeating this rejection of the next social worker, I thought perhaps Sean was describing a 'start again' pattern of behaviour whereby social workers were routinely complained about and

replaced by new ones. He expressed concern about the child being put in this position.

Sean seemed to have become demoralised with struggling to work with a difficult case of emotional abuse, having been dismissed from it amidst a silence about whether he actually done something wrong. This organisational response had left him lacking the support he needed in order to recover or move on from this experience. I wondered during subsequent listenings to the interview if the sense of distance there seemed to be from the subject matter and specific cases was a reflection of this lack of opportunity to deal with this painful episode. Perhaps he was still carrying a silent shame about his role in it all, unable to fully articulate his feelings about it. His focus had become the oppressive system he worked for, as he felt that he lacked any real agency to facilitate change in the lives of the people he worked with.

I felt fearful about pushing Sean to talk about his feelings and instead reflected back to him that it can feel like a demoralising situation to be in. His earlier comment about social workers experiencing burnout stayed with me:

*But yeah, it is tough. I think... I guess that's why people...why there is such a turnover of social workers, because people do just get, yeah, worn down by it and don't feel like the system is very supportive ultimately.*

This was a sad moment for me in the interview, as it seemed overall that Sean was suffering personally for the job. He described a lack of support, but in spite of this he was compelled to keep going. Sean went on to describe the ways he successfully managed to maintain his commitment to his job. He accessed support from relationships outside work. He found balance in his life and distance from the job by working part-time so he could pursue other interests. From interviewing Sean I wondered about social workers that were not able to achieve this balance, who might perhaps experience a kind of 'ego depletion' (Baumeister et al. 1998). Ego depletion is based on the idea that individuals have a limited pool of mental resources that can be used up. A way of controlling ego depletion is 'an effort to conserve remaining resources' rather than entering a state of full exhaustion (Baumeister et al. 2000). The difficult situation social workers experience in their work could perhaps impact more broadly on their functioning. In not having the opportunity to process the difficulties they have experienced in relation to their work;

perhaps having complaints made about them or being taken off case for reasons that seem contradictory, other personal resources may be affected. Sean was able to muse on the wider issues of social work; why he and others felt worn down by the way he felt he had to work, but he also seemed to experience a kind of subdued vagueness when it came to discussing his cases. His quietly defended position had a contemplative effect on me. I wanted to help him, and other social workers who experience these feelings of loss of agency, but I did not know how. I too became complicit in splitting off from 'the system', which seemed to be bigger than any of us.

### *The working environment*

In between the first and the second interview I wondered about the functional support 'the system' had to offer. I asked Sean about his experiences of support in the workplace in terms of talking about the complexities of cases. Sean talked initially about previous positive experiences in non-statutory residential work. In his current job there had been a recent amalgamation of small regional teams into one large one. In office space terms this meant that everyone was now located in one big office. Teams were not allocated specific spaces, and instead were required to 'hot-desk'; this is a situation in which 'staff have no fixed personal workspace and use any available desk as needed' (Hirst 2011: 768);

*Sean: I'm not someone... I'm probably introverted by nature so to go into a big space with lots of people, a lot of whom I don't know, is not easy for me. It's not my natural way of what I've attuned I guess. So unless you're... you know, some people are quite gregarious and able to go and talk and form relationships but often I'm left feeling a bit, you know, isolated and a bit oh, out of it sometimes, you know. And I've got my few little people I talk to and, you know, you tend to sit in the same sort of area, but you can feel a bit alone. And also just the fact... Just the head down nature of our work, whereas when I've worked in teams previously you worked as a team a lot more and you'd have lots of time to speak to each other informally and formally, whereas now I just go into work and just do my work, you know, and then go away again, you know, so it's much more functional I suppose.*

When Sean referred to the '*head down nature of our work*', I took this to mean that social workers have increasingly heavy caseloads and are using laptops and computerised systems more to do their work. Social work literature discusses the 'informational turn' leading to social workers who are 'tethered to their computer workstations' (Broadhurst and Mason 2014: 579), investing less time to engage in direct work (Parton, 2008) or in interactions with each other. The broader literature of human geographies and organisational management refers to employees being 'technology-enabled, nomadic workers' (Bean and Hamilton, 2006: 321). The importance of a social worker's car as a mobile workspace (Ferguson 2010) has been considered within the context of shifts from personally allocated desks to hot-desking and more home working. However, there is little social work literature that has discussed the impact of the physical environment of the workplace. Sean seemed to be suggesting that the set up of the office was more than an organisational change, and this broader shift in the 'ownership of space' (Hirst 2011: 768) was leading to an increased sense of isolation for him, being what he described as '*introverted by nature*'.

As I listened back to the recording of Sean's interview, I thought about Sean as an individual in the broader context of the team he worked in, and the even broader context of the social work profession. His words, 'alone' and 'isolated', did not tally with terms commonly linked to social work practice in the literature such as 'team' or 'relationship'. The language he used reflected the image of the nomadic solitary worker, as described in human geography literature about more generic office work culture. I felt lonely listening to Sean. The embodiment of 'otherness' and lack of trust did not seem conducive to going out on visits and building a natural ease and familiarity in relationships with the children and families.

The interview with Sean gave me reasons to pause and think about how readily our social interactions can get lost and it is possible to lose a basic sense of being a human being in the busy 'world of workflow and organisational processes' (Broadhurst and Mason 2014: 579). I wondered how quickly social workers might experience isolation and perhaps, burnout, if their practice existed permanently in this state of feeling unsupported. This kind of scenario paints a picture of a role where social workers are required to form relationships with families without having a network of supportive relationships in the workplace. Without being able to spare

the space, time and energy on the basics of building relationships in our own environments, how realistic is it to accomplish a relationship-based approach to social work practice with children and families?

## RELATIONSHIP-BASED SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

When I first started to code data from the interviews, I had one category for 'relationships'. This category quickly cascaded into sub-sections, as social workers described the different interactions occurring in their work between them and the people they came into contact with. Observations of relationships between parents and children were often a key concern at the start of interviews as social workers explained how they grappled with identifying what an emotionally harmful relationship looked like. Participants' relationships with parents, children, other workers and managers were usually the main focus for making sense of everyday work, and appraising if it was progressing effectively.

Discussions during interviews with the social workers often focused on the nature of the relationship between them and family members. Transparent, honest and supportive relationships were described across the board as central to positive communication with service-users. Defensiveness and hostility on the part of families were regarded as entirely understandable reactions, and therefore anticipated by all participants as normal under the circumstances of their involvement. A benchmark for a 'good' relationship was often whether parents and children remained in contact with them, in spite of levels of hostility in their interactions. Talk about 'broken trust' or a 'strengthened' bond frequently arose. The social workers I interviewed often spoke of needing to break bad or difficult news to families and recalled how uncomfortable being direct with families could be, particularly as a newly qualified worker. Building trust and reducing animosity were primary goals when meeting families for the first time.

*Leon: They might not be happy that you are there but they are kind of satisfied that they understand why you are there*

There are numerous ways in which the notion of 'relationships' can be discussed in the context of child protection work, but it is most often described in the literature in relation to practice that is communicative and a positive driver for change.

Research indicates that when bureaucratic systems and the pressure of timescales in social work practice are put to one side, the social work encounter becomes about the people involved and the emotional complexity of the relationship. A caring and flexible approach to interventions with families in distress is regarded as most successful (Barlow and Scott, 2010), with the quality of the 'therapeutic bond' between a social worker and the family forming the basis for what is conceived of as a positive intervention (Knei-Paz 2009). Paradoxically, the literature concerning emotional abuse often problematises 'the relationship'; it can be something harmful and insidious when it is unhealthy. It is this aspect, which requires further attention for a depth exploration of what the role of individual social worker brings to cases of emotional abuse.

Previous sections in this chapter have touched on the harm that the act of a social work intervention can potentially add to an emotionally abusive situation, and how social workers manage and respond to this contradiction in their helping role. Social workers Fiona, Vicky and Sky indicated their anxiety and guilt in relation to making a bad situation worse, as they attempted to work around the demands of the system. Students Wesley and Becca felt that it was integral to the social work role that workers address incongruity in their work head on with their employers. In the following section I have focused on data from interviews that looks at the triangular social worker-child-parent relationship in order to explore the dynamics that can occur when social workers intervene with families where emotional abuse occurs. How, for example the act of intervention into an abusive family situation can potentially increase the exposure of the child to emotional harm. The ways in which these dynamics are noticed, experienced and responded to by individual social workers is also of interest.

When thinking about a more complicated conceptualisation of relationships, I recalled Fiona's relationship with the 'letter-box' children, which she found to be complex and distressing. I noted during the interview that relationships do not automatically bring warm and positive intimacy. In child protection work, relations are not easy and 'partnership doesn't mean you have to be friends' (Ruch 2011: 439). This was certainly the case in the situation of Fiona and the mother of the letterbox children with whom she was angry. During our second interview, Fiona returned to wanting to talk about how she felt her level of rapport with parents in

general influenced her level of commitment to work with them. She felt that parents' receptiveness to her offers of support impacted on how she progressed work with the case.

*And sometimes I do think...I have to question why I am thinking more, why am I so supportive of this particular mum and more cynical I guess about this particular mum, and what is that about? And I like to think that is based on the history and the evidence and stuff but yes, sometimes I think it is about whether you bond with someone, whether there is...whether you can build a relationship, you know? And I don't think that is conscious initially, I don't. But there are some that I think oh I have got to go and see them. And the feeling of dread knowing it is going to be...they are just going to annihilate me, it is going to be really, really hard. And I know I have got to do it and I will but I am already going in with that attitude and that is really difficult, you know? Whereas others I think, oh they are so lovely I really want that to work. And do you then miss if there is something that isn't right, you know? So yes it all has an impact doesn't it?*

In this situation Fiona explained her concern that perhaps the lack of a bond between them had left Fiona with a dread of interactions with the mother. This in turn limited the productivity of Fiona's work with her, consequently influencing her assessment of the mother's ability to engage. Previous research indicates that parents who comply with social workers are more likely to form a positive relationship with them (Holland 2000). Social workers tend to derive some 'causal explanation' for parental behaviour before the start of child protection assessments (Holland 2000). These explanations are formed from various sources including personal experience and information contained in referrals. By offering plausible explanations for their behaviour and showing capacity to change it is likely that a stronger relationship will be formed between a parent and a social worker.

Research indicates that in situations deemed to be of high risk, whether a child remains in the family home can depend on the parents' ability and willingness to engage in a talking relationship with their social worker (Holland 2000). Outcomes for a child's future can rely in part on the relationship the parent forms with the social worker, and this is particularly important in work with emotional abuse, where effective relationships can facilitate change (Barlow and Schrader-Macmillan 2009).

My thoughts returned to the interview with Sean, during which he described the relationship between himself, as social worker, the child and her parents:



*Sean: And she would get to the point of saying she didn't want to see me and then after the next social worker she didn't want to see that person, you know. So it's really sort of horrible to have her feel...put in that position.*

***I: So the parents were basically encouraging her to feel uncomfortable about seeing you?***

*Sean: Yeah. I think... Yeah. Just sort of... I don't know how quite, but just sort of slightly poisoning the relationship. Because they were always...the two girls were always really pleased when you come round, you know, because it was giving them attention and playing with them, which was... There was a little bit of concern about that as well because they tended to be quite on you and you know, in your face, and it was like, you know, not many boundaries somehow. But I noticed it a couple of times that she said I don't want to talk to you, I don't want to talk to you. So, you know, ...parents were probably just encouraging her not to want to or, I don't know, just making her feel guilty about it or something.*

Sean, and other social workers I interviewed, described to me the complex and often distressing experience of becoming involved with a family who do not want social work interventions. Sean was aware that the fear and hostility generated in the parents meant that his very presence led to him becoming implicit in promoting further emotionally abusive dynamics. The children, at first pleased to have some attention and a playmate, moved between social work visits from showing a lack of boundaries with strangers to a position of being unwitting instruments of resistance. Children are often influenced by their parents' negative feelings about social work involvement (Lefevre 2008; Davies and Ward 1995). In the situation Sean described, parental discontentment dictated they swung from being over-familiar with strangers, to a polarised place of suspicion and mistrust. This confusing and '*poisoning*' web of unarticulated adult relationships must have been, as Sean speculated, '*horrible*' for the children concerned.

However, these complicated dynamics were not untangled and re-woven with trust and positive resolutions. Instead, Sean said, the children started all over again with another worker. During this process they were educated in the obstruction of social work intervention. One social worker was replaced with another and the children became accustomed to being embroiled in an emotionally exhausting and confusing tug-of-war between parents and social services.

Theresa described her experience of entering a home where a vulnerable and previously friendly child no longer wished to talk to her:

*... And one visit this child eventually, who has attachment difficulties as well, and she crawled round behind me, sat on the chair behind me, mum and dad were still in the living room and I said to her, "Have I done something to upset you?" And she said, "I'm not talking to you." And I said, "Oh dear, I'm so sorry, why won't you talk to me?" And she said, "Because you're wicked." And I said, "Why am I wicked?" And she said, "Because daddy says you're wicked."*

The child reiterated her father's words, which described Theresa in a way that resembled a fairytale witch as 'wicked'. She did this whilst approaching Theresa, positioning herself behind her and continuing to interact with her. Theresa's description and attention to attachment theory, I thought, indicated well her observations of the confused and uncertain child. Children often tend to protect their parents and do not 'talk about their family affairs easily' (Davies and Ward 1995). This child was, perhaps, becoming increasingly uncertain of who to trust and how to behave with people who her parents did not approve of.

Aside from interactions with families, social workers often discussed if they thought they were interacting with other practitioners effectively. Sean amongst others spoke favorably of past opportunities he had to work in pairs. These experiences had allowed him to develop more effective practice. In the second interview Sean said:

*And just the luxury of doing some visits with other people, I think that's such a loss that we don't do that more. And I know we haven't got the capacity to do it more but I do think that thing of having a visit, even, you know, when you go out with a newly qualified person or a student just shadowing, it's always interesting to ask them afterwards what they thought, what they saw, what they felt, you know. And that just sort of sharing, having a different angle on something is... And also to see how other people operate, you know, just that thing of seeing how other social workers manage and use their communication skills. There's masses of stuff that we miss out on because we don't do that more. It's a shame.*

Sean spoke, as he had done earlier, about the opportunity to work alongside colleagues as a 'luxury'. Co-working has been identified in social work research as a rare occurrence, but one that practitioners feel benefits their practice (Ruch 2013). It seemed here to be something that happened in a bygone era before resources had diminished to the extent that 'sharing' was deemed beyond capacity.

## THE INTERVIEW SPACE AS AN EXPLORATION OF SOCIAL WORKER SUBJECTIVITY

Depending on the relationship I had with the social workers I was interviewing and their personal comfort with discussing their emotions, people used the interview space in different ways. Sometimes the interview was a domain for social workers in which to justify their thoughts and feelings, and perform good practice. At other times it was an opportunity to explore aspects of themselves. They considered how their anxieties are embodied in their day-to-day work. It was time to reflect on and make sense of emotional responses. As the interviewer I was an active part of the emotional containment process. I steered the conversation in other directions when I detected that participants might be becoming more upset than either the ethical review process or my own defenses allowed for. Emotion emerged in multiple ways, both in the interactions the social worker reported on and in the way they engaged in the interviews. Emotion was ever present in the research relationship.

An understanding of our own inner worlds can assist in the reconciliation of personal values with the role of assessing and working with abuse. How emotions are used, especially in relation to the less tangible entity of emotional abuse, requires additional care as emotions play such a central role in human interactions (Gergen in Burkitt 1997). The panel activity showed me that social workers, understandably, find it necessary to put an appropriate filter on their emotional output in public arenas. As the professional identity of being a social worker is so intertwined with personal emotional responses to cases, this filter extends to use in situations where social workers are representing their own views. The stories they tell about the families they work with are internally moderated before they are shared. During interviews, the participants demonstrated through their interactions with me, and the stories they told, how fundamental it is to the social work role to contain emotion. This containment process becomes particularly complex where the causes of harm are not immediately tangible, and further invisible emotionally webs of relations are woven.

The social workers interviewed had varying attitudes towards their feelings, and the premise of the research attracted a number of workers who thought that in order to

engage effectively in supporting children and families they must at times consider the troubling impact, as well as the positives, of their individual agency on their practice. It is likely, therefore, that the chapter has been more representative of social workers who take a reflective stance on the emotional aspect of social work relationships.

## CHAPTER CONCLUSION

The aim of this chapter has been to analyse data segments in order to demonstrate the differing empirical experiences of individual social workers when they work with emotional abuse. Through interrogating the narratives of practitioners such as Fiona, Bryony and Sean, it was possible to assemble a more tangible picture of their psychosocial subjectivities, thereby tracing connections between their deeper thought processes and the decisions they make during practice. From a critical realist perspective, the research demonstrates two important processes. Firstly, how subjectivity contributes to reflexive practice; how, for example it influences how practitioners interact, and also possibly refrain from interacting, with children, families and other professionals. Secondly, the research illuminates the various processes that occur when subjective agents engage with institutional aspects of social work, such as the legal system and policy guidelines. The research methodology has provided a framework of critical thinking for which to better understand how professional reflexivity occurs. This chapter plots out the potential role and impact of subjectivity on child protection work with emotional abuse. It indicates that working more effectively with emotional abuse is not a matter of following checklists and procedural guidelines without question. It is more concerned with the way in which social workers engage with service-users and with the governing systems associated with the work. It encourages the development of a stronger awareness of the ways in which individual subjectivity is integrated into the way in which work is carried out. This sets the scene for a closer look at this aspect of practitioner use of self during the processes of identifying and evidencing emotional abuse.

## CHAPTER 5: IDENTIFYING AND EVIDENCING EMOTIONAL ABUSE

### INTRODUCTION

The literature review chapter established that social workers often struggle in identifying emotional abuse, and they also find working with the law a challenging and complicated process, particularly when giving evidence in court. The previous analysis chapter indicated that individual social workers are influenced by subjective factors such as their motivations for doing the job, their approach to relationships, the training they have received and how supported they feel in their workplace. This chapter presents more of the interview data. It looks closely at the narratives of individual social workers as they describe how they identify emotional abuse as a concern, and present evidence of its harm for the child. The intention is to present open and honest accounts by social workers of how they work. My researcher positioning in relation to this objective is acknowledged and reflected upon throughout the chapter.

The chapter begins with an analysis of an interview with experienced social worker Li, who described her very visceral experiences of working with emotional abuse. Then, within the setting of a focus group, Sky's experiences as a student social worker are explored to consider ideas about accountability and self-efficacy in relation to work with an emotionally abusive family system. The issues of 'trial by media', and working within a legal arena follows this. Understanding why some social workers adapt to working with its language and frameworks more readily than others are considered with reference to interviews with Bryony and Tom. The notion of the defended practitioner is a theme that runs through pressurised situations where social workers are required to provide evidence of emotional abuse.

### IDENTIFYING AND DESCRIBING EMOTIONAL ABUSE

When social workers described instances of visiting homes to assess for the possibility of emotional abuse, they often spoke of contradictions between familial appearances and behaviours, which proved to be a source of tension during the

assessment process. On one hand, children may be well clothed and live in a comfortable home. There would be no signs of physical neglect or abuse, which are traditionally indicators of harm that social workers look out for. However, on the other hand familial behaviours were concerning enough to be assessed as emotional harmful. Li spoke of the difficulties of explaining the harm of witnessing domestic violence, not only to the family concerned and other professionals, but in the first instance, to herself.

*... I mean they live in a beautiful house, they go to school, they've got friends, mum has been a very steady person despite her relationship with her husband – the children's father – despite of that, and she has maintained that kind of care even after he was removed from the house. So in terms of domestic violence, I don't see these children as so, you know, sort of abused in the terms of emotional abuse. And it's quite tricky because they are...they have been emotionally abused, they've seen their mum being beaten up by their dad in front of the pier...*

It is often the case that children who are being abused are expected to have an unkempt appearance, exhibit lack of compliance and struggle at school (Munro 1996, Braye and Preston-Shoot 1990, Brown and Ward 2012). Checklists, like CAADA October 2014: [www.caada.org.uk](http://www.caada.org.uk)) may be able to measure the extent of parental domestic violence, but impact of this kind of experience on a child's inner world may not be adequately substantiated through answers to a series of closed questions. More detailed knowledge is required to make a more nuanced assessment about, for example, the outcomes for a child where parental pressure is exerted for them to conform through behaviours such as spurning, terrorising and isolation from their peers. Many of the social workers I interviewed reported that children who were experiencing emotional abuse were well turned out, compliant, polite and performed well at school. Tom recalled:

*There were presenting signs of domestic violence and parental alcohol misuse, but the children presented incredibly well, really well. They were fantastic at school, high achievers in school, really articulate, engaged well with social workers. And the feelings were these were simply just very, very resilient children who, despite everything that was going on at home are fine. And it was only by getting alongside them and over a period of time seeing them regularly and chipping away at that it became clear that they're holding on to an awful lot of anxiety, trauma, and worry about their parents and their parents relationship. Because up until then they were all saying, 'Everything is fine, we didn't know our parents would fight.' and all the rest of it. And actually, what became clear is they would be sitting on top of the stairs crying, or in the room aware that this was happening, and having a lot of stress about it. While*

*the parents felt they weren't exposing their children to domestic violence, they were, and for me that's emotional abuse. Because what would happen is these children knew that they needed to project a certain sense out to the outside, and that must have been very tiring for them, to have to feel that they had to do that.*

## EXPLORING SUBJECTIVITY IN PRACTICE: 'LI'

It is not always easy for social workers to put into words what is troubling about a family relationship and why emotional abuse is a concern, particularly when under pressures of time and with limited resources. In the excerpt that follows, Li an experienced child protection social worker, explored how she uses her empirical experiences to decide that a case was emotionally abusive. She progressed beyond her personal interpretations about what provoked her concerns to build evidence which a court was able to accept as significantly harmful.

I asked Li to talk about a case where emotional abuse was clearly present. She described a mother and her relationship with her 12 year old daughter.

*...it was very much like a Siamese relationship and I've never seen something like this before. So, you know, sort of sleeping in the same bunk bed, her completely isolated from everything that was outside. You know, she didn't attend school, she didn't attend nursery, she didn't attend any form of activities of a child her age. She was quite... She was very cute but in a way...in a very strange way because she liked insects and reptiles, and for a girl to enjoy watching reptiles and like insects, it's kind of unusual. Quirky I could say, but not necessarily it was on the verge of quirkiness, and you know, weirdness and stuff like that. So it was quite tricky. Third generation where she lived. So she was the third generation living with mum and grandmother in the same house, all seem to be, you know, sort of like a...I can't even describe...like a globe of abuse so it was everything happening inside the house.*

During my initial 'listening to' the first interview transcript with Li, I focused on her evocative narrative of the case. I wondered about the culture of social workers; how they construct a story about a family situation to demonstrate their concerns for the benefit of the listener. Li started her narrative about the family with the figurative use of term '*siamese twins*', which would not have the same impact as substituting it with the term 'conjoined twins'. To me it suggested an unnatural spectacle that might be found in a Victorian freak show. The weaving together of such dramatic 'presentational and discursive symbols' (Hollway and Froggett 2012: 14) were

perhaps intended to evoke fear and disgust, and to emphasize the situation was wrong and unnatural.

There are aspects of the parent's care in the first part of this quote from Li's description which are more consensually and objectively worrying, such as a child who is isolated from contact with other children or the outside world. Li then moved on to talk about the child in a more abstract way, drawing on some gendered assumptions about what girls should be like, when she described the child's liking of '*insects and reptiles*'. I thought back to the traditional nursery rhyme from the 1800s that conveys popular stereotypes about children, where girls are made of 'sugar and spice and everything nice' whilst little boys are made of 'frogs and snails and puppy dog tails'. This folklore suggests that boys embody insects and reptiles, whilst girls embody other 'nice' and sweet things, reinforcing the idea that children who do not subscribe to their gendered preferences are unnatural.

The last section of the quote is perhaps the most concerning in terms of mapping child protection concerns through chronological methods; the '*globe of abuse*' seemed to refer to the intra-familial history of abuse. An abusive family system maintained by three generations of the family living under the same roof. Li subsequently described the daughter as the '*third generation of subtle emotional abuse*'. The description of the '*globe of abuse*' had the instant and powerful consequence of inducing a strong emotional effect in me. I was alarmed by the suffocating dynamics within the family home. Even though the precise meaning of the situation remained vague and unclear (Rose 2012), I felt sufficiently disturbed to trust that Li's concerns for the child were not without basis, particularly alongside the rest of the more factual worries that she subsequently raised.

I felt conflicted about this story as Li spoke; on the one hand I do not think a girl who likes insects and reptiles is strange, but on the other hand I thought there could easily be another situation where I might fleetingly make a judgment based on some assumptions that are embedded in my own cultural experiences and childhood, and perhaps, if I had held the same opinion as Li on a girl's preferences, this it would be concerning to me too. Visual representations of the family in Li's narrative are of particular interest. Metaphors can fill in the gaps in situations where concerns seem intangible, and evoke strong emotional responses. The description of the nature of the relationship between the mother and daughter was rich and



memorable. 'In making everyday judgements, people take mental shortcuts' (Munro 1999: 797). The story Li told was imbued with her own notions of 'normality'.

Descriptions of stereotypical gendered behaviours helped Li begin to unpick what she saw as a skewed and sinister scene. Having been influenced by literature about psychosocial social work, I thought it important that non-judgmental spaces to 'work through' thoughts can help avoid the suppression of 'wrong' or 'inappropriate' beliefs which can lead to more serious misjudgements or oversights. The problem with this, however, is that although the child's liking of insects and reptiles was not itself worrying, when woven into the story it becomes part of a bigger picture. I wondered where in the 'real' world of social work practice would Li define the boundaries between judging the parent-child relationship as emotionally abusive rather than just an extremely close one that was unfamiliar and strange to her? In making a connection between Li's 'inner' world of emotional reactions to a child and the 'outer' realities (Winnicott 1985) of her social worker role, I considered the difficult boundary between subjective judgments about relationships and the realities of labelling a case as objectively concerning.

Li's narrative is typical of how a story might be told between friends, colleagues, or most informal situations. However, I was hearing an informal assessment of emotional abuse. For many social workers, the telling of such a story, may be a mechanism to be used in a safe space with trusted 'similar and familiars' (Archer 2007: 270); between colleagues with comparable experiences, who may be able to listen, support and guide each other to make sense of something they find troubling. Li used established symbols from a 'societal collective unconscious' (Hollway and Froggett 2012) to build a fuller picture of the dark, oppressive nature of the home and the relationships she encountered within it. The way someone tells a story may 'reveal what is important to the interviewee' (Hollway and Jefferson 2007: 1), and Li's narrative is an example of how social workers' personal and subjective responses to families can 'muddy the waters', and detract from building an evidential case about the presence of emotional abuse. Judgments are formed through interpersonal interactions that are 'encoded in a complex web of political, cultural, social, and family relationships.' Therefore 'what we see is mediated by what we expect to see' (Nicholls 2009: 171). Li had gendered expectations of girls, and her subjective feelings had to be sorted from the more 'concrete' evidence in

order to arrive at a case that could be taken to a court of law. Later in the interview Li said much more about the other evidence she gathered in respect of the family to construct a basis upon which she was able to remove the child from her mother's care, which stemmed from her descriptions. These included poor school attendance, fabricated illness and social isolation.

## CULTURAL DIFFERENCE

During our second interview I reflected with Li on our first interview. I felt grateful for her transparency, and I did not want Li to lose trust in me by interrogating her about her descriptions of the family, but I wanted to know more about the mother and daughter 'Siamese Twins'. What she had shared had disturbed her, even though it would not be included in a court report. I asked her to explain what makes a particular situation strange, or strikes us as unsettling.

Li said that the family came from another European country where close-knit family life is normal and against this background the mother's behaviour was not so unusual. She felt that cultural circumstances played an important role. Behaviours like the family's level of physical closeness that might seem excessive to us, were not so unusual in their country of origin. In part, it seemed that Li took a step back and qualified her initial observations by deconstructing what she'd already said. Perhaps in referring to the more 'real' world of accountability and fact, she separated her subjective thoughts from the evidence available. She offered more concrete evidential information about chronologies of harmful behaviour in the family unit.

I asked Li more about her own origins, and experiences of growing up in one country, practising social work there, and then moving to work in the UK. Li grew up and first practised social work in a country under communist governance. She said there was an expectation back then that people cared for one another's children without real financial gain. She had found it to be a huge contrast when she relocated to England and encountered a care system where children in care were not accepted in the same way as a carer's birth children, and seemed to have many conditions and financial transactions attached to their accommodation. Having relocated from elsewhere, Li said her experiences of growing up in a

different culture gave her the advantage of insight into the cultural misunderstanding that arise between immigrant families to England and social services. She said it gave her the confidence to change what she called her 'hat' when she needed to express clearly to parents what to do when she identified their behaviours as harmful. She used her own experiences to explain to families why social workers become involved in their lives and where the thresholds of acceptable behaviour lie:

*Okay, fine, you are from a different culture; do your own culture and support your child with your own culture, but you can't send a child to school with head lice; you can't just not engage, you know, or allow your child to access some form of education...I do my own stuff for example for Christmas I cook mixed Christmas. I cook turkey and I cook something else, or I bake, you know, mince pies and I bake my own traditional food, but I still send my children...*

Following the second interview, I used the listening guide (Doucet and Mauthner 2008) flexibly to firstly focus on their second level of analysis; focusing on the 'active I' of Li's story. In doing this, the narrator is put at the centre of the story and is allowed to 'speak about who they believe they are' (Doucet and Mauthner 2008: 406). For me, Li was saying she was a migrant, like the family she described, but unlike them she had adjusted to her new environment. The mother in the 'Siamese Twin' case, however, was using her sense of cultural difference as an excuse for neglectful and harmful parenting which, as a migrant herself, Li felt able to challenge.

I still felt there was something left unsaid about the way in which Li views the world, what she views as strange and how this has influenced her thinking. I returned to Doucet and Mauthner's first level of analysis, and made space for exploring my own emotional responses. Although I was concerned my questioning about her scary story was too abstract, and, whether like me she was unable to immediately and simply answer the question, it can also be difficult to question one's values and ideals about what a healthy home-life constitutes. Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' (1984) is useful in exploring why Li may have been unable to answer why the household struck her as strange. Habitus is a complex result of embodying social structures, such as ethnicity, welfare systems and educational experiences that we carry with us. Although the internalised notion of habitus should not be static, and constantly evolving with no 'deliberate pursuit of coherence' or 'conscious

concentration' (Bourdieu 1984: 170) it is nonetheless the embodied history of our past experiences. To shift one's values about what constitutes 'normal' behaviour is not necessarily an easy and instantaneous task.

If habitus is the embodiment of structure, emotional responses may be seen as a structural output of a person's individual habitus. The expectation on the social worker to cast aside their emotional responses and cultural reference points and instead seek out hard 'objective' evidence of abuse, can be overwhelming. There is a particular pressure on social workers to find hard evidence, which corroborates the presence of risk. The process of seeking out such information is also arguably a means of endorsing one's own cultural assumptions and expectations and of avoiding a direct challenge to one's own habitus. This does not mean that the child was not at risk, but Li may have met my questions about the scary story with a fear of accountability, and an understandable reticence at dismissing her deeply held views that were, to her, intuitive sources of knowledge. She focused instead on replacing her account of the relationship with factual information that could be used to evidence abuse in a more functional, but less nuanced way.

I applied Doucet and Mauthner's fourth stage of analysis: placing people in cultural context to help me understand how individual social workers negotiate aspects of their own identities within the wider expectations of English child protection social work culture. For example, how they reconcile the law and policy definition of emotional abuse with what they believe in a more instinctive way to be a caring relationship; what love should look like. I noticed that Li referred to everyday 'normal' activities such as a baking at Christmas to model how it is possible to integrate one's own cultural difference into a broader English societal context. There is significant pressure on social workers to conform to the beliefs produced by a specific welfare system. Li's activities as a social worker; how she uses her powers in her everyday work, depend on how successfully she is able to reconcile aspects of her subjectivity to meet the very specific cultural construction, and habitus, of English child protection social work.

### *Panel analysis*

I shared the piece of data from the start of the chapter with the analysis panel. There were immediate concerns from the group of students that Li's descriptions were not of abuse and could clearly be explained by cultural difference. The group suggested the level of personal opinion and emotion displayed by Li was not a legitimate means of assessment, and that it should be curtailed:

*Becca: There's not enough fact – perhaps use of emotional language is the only way to get it across, but obviously you have to have fact to back it up.*

The group was self-moderating and they were keen to pose each possible side of the argument, acknowledging when they were perhaps 'playing devil's advocate', before offering potentially provocative statements. The group had very little information to go on, but from the information they had they felt that Li was being too descriptive, too caught up in their 'value judgments' and one group member commented:

*Wesley: It strikes me that you almost know more about Li than you know about the child.*

The group seemed to echo the reflective, self-correcting stance of Li, exhibiting restraint and modification when they felt that they'd got carried away with their critique of Li's practice. One said '*perhaps we're being unfair*' when they reflected on their own comments, acknowledging that their responses were based on very little information.

Once again, as I when I had shared Fiona's data, I felt I had betrayed Li and made her an easy target for criticism. I thought back to the social workers in previous child protection enquiries. Lisa Arthurworrey was Victoria Climbié's social worker and missed multiple opportunities to protect Victoria. Although she was 'badly let down' (Laming 2003: 109) by her managers, at the time she was dismissed for her failings. I reflected on how exposing it is for social workers to be held up for public scrutiny for decision they have to make, particularly when they do not necessarily have all of the information they need to make the best decision for the child concerned.

The public inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié suggested that oversights were made regarding her abuse because assumptions were made about her cultural background. Victoria stood to attention for her carers, which social worker

Arthurworrey did not see as concerning because obedience is an 'important feature of the Afro-Caribbean family script' (Laming 2003: 345). Victoria's subservient behaviour alone would not be a scenario that would meet the thresholds for a child protection intervention, but it was an aspect of a broader and more concerning picture, which offered an insight into the relationship Victoria had with her carers. Arthurworrey explained this away through her interpretation of cultural norms. It serves as a reminder that work with children and families from different cultures can happen 'through a veil' of ambiguity (Riessman and Quinney 2005: 400). Even when people speak the 'same' language, where there is uncertainty with regards to a family situation, it is sometimes easier to make convenient assumptions that reject disturbing ambiguities and allow the social worker to move onto the safer territory of concrete facts.

A year on from carrying out this interview I wondered about how this evocative narrative gave rise to an excursion that 'infiltrated' my unconscious (Rose 2012). How it quickly became difficult to see the facts from the social worker's subjective observations, and in what ways these everyday interactions between professionals influence outcomes for service users. I wondered too about my power as a researcher, who was in the position to select this story from many others to re-tell, and in turn, influence opinions about emotional abuse and how it is identified.

## TRIAL BY MEDIA

The re-telling of stories is a notion that can be considered within the context of the ways in which child deaths are reported in broadcast news. The advent of public child abuse enquiries has provided a major catalyst for 'ventilating in a very public way, major criticisms of social work in the area of child care' (Parton and Martin 1989: 34). Inquiries have been numerous since the death of Maria Colwell at the hands of her stepfather in 1973 (Butler and Drakeford 2011: 197). Media interest in these enquiries have led to an increasing expectation that social worker be held accountable by the public for more than just trying to protect and support vulnerable people. There is expectation that social workers be vigilant corporate parents who are directly responsible for the welfare of all children.

Maria Ward was social worker for 'Baby P', Peter Connelly, a 17-month-old boy who died at the hands of his mother, her boyfriend and the boyfriend's friend in 2007. The face of Maria Ward; a 'poor, haunted looking social worker' (Harvey 2010: 140) had been all over the national media whilst I was doing my social work training. She was a newly qualified social worker when she had been assigned to visit Peter, and, along with other social workers in her team, had been dismissed for failing to protect him. I watched with my year group as she was vilified by the nation. Harvey (2010) asks 'who would swap places with her?' During the panel analysis group I thought back to this time. I thought it likely that myself, Li and the social work students might all at one time or another recognise parts of our practice or that of our colleagues' as poor or incomplete. We might all witness ourselves as fearful, brushing away difficult feelings in response to distressing situations. Understandably, no social worker wants to acknowledge being like either Lisa Arthurworrey or Maria Ward.

I have found anxiety in every social worker I have interviewed, generated by the fear of getting it wrong, being punished in public for it and then having to live with the guilt and humiliation. The phenomenon of trial by media was something that Bryony brought up early in our first interview as a stress of the job in relation to missing or not acting on a sign of abuse:

*Trial by media and losing your job and everything that goes with that and just on top of the guilt you'd feel that something happened to a child when actually there was no more that I could have done at that time than I was already doing. But I do think it's terrifying that ... you know, I still think ... it's still terrifying now.*

She went on to talk about the way in which she commonly sees newly qualified social workers in her office trying to safeguard against this with copious recordings.

*And newly qualifieds when they come in I think, "Oh bless you." They spend the night thinking, "Oh, well, if I've written up my visit that's OK." I'm like, "Well, it's not actually, you'll still get sacked, but don't worry about it, good luck with that." Because, you know, you look at even ... I don't know there seems to be this general thing that if you've written it up then everything's going to be OK and I don't really think that's the case to be honest. Writing it on the system ... although it's informative for other people and it's important that it's there so that when you ... it doesn't make any difference to that child's life actually.*

As a child becomes a 'poison container' for the unbearable feelings a parent experiences but is unable to deal with (Harvey 2010: 141), the social worker

becomes a receptacle for the unthinkable anguish the public cannot process for themselves at the injury or death of a child. This is a heavy burden for social workers to carry. It is possible to become preoccupied, even paralysed by just the very idea of being in this role, and what could happen to them if they get it wrong. Social workers 'fill the role for media hatred' (Harvey 2010: 140) that mirrors a public need to displace the distressing idea of child abuse. This scapegoating of the social work profession, it has been suggested, is driven by the press and enhanced by the government (Jones 2014). In the years since the 'moral panic' surrounding the death of Peter Connelly there has been increasing difficulty recruiting and retaining social workers (Jones 2014) partly for this reason.

In our second interview Bryony went on to reflect upon how being a social worker impacts on her everyday life when she is not at work:

*... it's I suppose frustrating to be represented so wrongly and it's like anything, it's the no win situation. If we storm in and take children away, then we are hideous child snatchers and if we don't then we are just, you know, neglectful useless people that allow children to die because we are lazy I suppose. It is just a massive lack of understanding and it just makes it difficult I suppose to then, like generally I wouldn't, if I meet new people I don't generally say straight away that I'm a social worker. I say I work for the Council or I work with kids or something like that, I brush over it and move on.*

Bryony's account offers an emotive response to the criticism social workers often receive, and an alternative narrative of child protection work from the point of view of one social worker. As the interviews took place, a collection of subjective encounters with emotional abuse emerged, which represented the practice of social workers with a range of defining characteristics. The level of experience a social worker has is often cited as influential in practice responses. Bryony touched upon this when she highlighted a common anxious response she had witnessed by newly qualified social workers to their work, which was the writing up of accounts of their visits on the organisational database. Newly qualified workers usually receive greater supervisory guidance (Turner-Daly and Jack: 2014) early on in their careers so they can be assisted in managing their workload. Students who are training to be social workers are required to complete practice placements, so they can gain practice experience under close supervision.



## ENCOUNTERS OF A STUDENT SOCIAL WORKER: 'SKY'

Li and Bryony are experienced social workers having worked for over fifteen years and eight years respectively. Sky has been a social worker for four years, and had a clear memory of her early experiences in the job. She spoke about her work during the DAT focus group, the participants of which were from two different teams in two separate localities. They were meeting for practice related training, and the focus group was held half way through the course. The participants of the focus group had spent a few sessions together, and seemed to be comfortable sharing their work experiences in each other's company. The purpose of the focus group was for participants to discuss their work with children and families where emotional harm is, or may be present. Sky gave a description of how she identified the presence of harmful emotional behaviour by a mother towards her children:

*I think that's the thing about emotional abuse is that...the power dynamics within it are just so difficult...and I remember the first time I came across it, I was a student and I didn't know what I was walking into. You know, it was a 10-year-old boy who...I think a referral was made from the school because they were worried about his behaviour in school. And at home, he...er I think he'd wrapped a skipping rope around his neck and said that he was trying to kill himself. So that was kind of why we went out under the kind of...well, we were trying to...do assessments to work out whether there was anything wrong. His mum was adamant that, you know, he had something wrong with him. That he was either autistic or that he needed CAMHS involvement. The school were just saying, "Something doesn't add up here, because at school he's alright." And because I was a student and quite inexperienced, I kind of went in at that angle. And mum was lovely and very welcoming, um, you know, always very willing to meet me for appointments. Always offered me drinks. Kind of came across as this really lovely woman. Then it emerged that he had a younger sister, um and when I started to kind of watch how she parented both of them,...she did it so differently. She kind of, she loved this little girl. Even to the extent that this little girl had a massive bedroom with everything that she wanted in it and this little boy had a tiny room um and...just kind of the venom between the mum and the son was – they just kept having arguments about stupid things, and they escalated, you know, she kept calling the police because she said he was bullying her...erm. It took me really the whole of my student placement to kind of work out that actually this was a really emotionally abusive environment. It turned out that his dad had been really physically violent towards mum. And when she looked at him, she saw dad in him, umm. So I kind of had to leave that and pass it on to another social worker and kind of hope that that was all sorted out. And I found out not long ago that actually, this was like three years ago and he's just come into care because it has just been going on for that long, and it's obviously*

*reached a...pivotal point where he can't remain there. But identifying it, particularly when you're inexperienced, is really, really difficult. Because you go out for one thing and actually, it's a whole other...a whole other thing going on.*

Sky's description of encountering emotional abuse for the first time demonstrates, step by step, how she worked through identifying and assessment process. Doucet and Mauthner's listening guide (2008) was a useful tool for the analysis of her account. At the outset Sky set the scene, suggesting the theme of complex 'power dynamics' were central to how she made sense of the dysfunctional family system. She pointed out she was a student, indicating that that this was a learning experience for her. During a first listening Sky gave what I took to be a calm and ordered story of identifying complex and intangible emotional abuse. She simultaneously reflected on her own uncertainty of how to render it visible.

There are many ways to consider Sky's 'affective meaning-making' process (Weatherell 2013); how, for example, Sky turned her inner experience of this case into a verbal expression of what it was like for her to identify emotional abuse. I noticed the sequencing and consequence of events (Riessman and Quinney 2005: 394). She immediately situated herself within the context of being an inexperienced student, lacking prior knowledge, perhaps feeling unskilled. '*...I didn't know what I was walking into...*' indicated to me that she felt she entered unwittingly into a complex and potentially volatile situation. This hints at the fear she may have experienced during work with the family, but during the focus group she choose not to express. She finishes the story with a similar qualifying statement.

*'...identifying it, particularly when you're inexperienced, is really, really difficult ...'.*

Sky described the boy's behavioural and verbal signs of emotional distress. Professionals at the school suspected there were problems at home, whilst the mother felt the boy's behaviour was a symptom of autism or of something being '*wrong with him*'. On visiting the home Sky found the mother to be '*lovely and welcoming*'. It seemed Sky felt that without pre-existing concerns she would have deemed the situation a non-abusive one. She says '*...And because I was a student and quite inexperienced...*' before detailing her first encounter with the boy's mother. This suggested to me that she felt wrong footed by how nice the mother seemed to be when perhaps, on reflection, she had assumed that someone was

potentially abusing her child should be hostile and unwelcoming. Through her description of the subsequent steps she took, she seemed to critically review her own personal judgements (Munro 1999: 755). She evaluated how reliable her initial impression of the mother was, and what sources of evidence might be worth pursuing in order to follow up on the school's concerns. Sky gathered historical information about the family system, such as a history of domestic violence to develop a more comprehensive picture of the family's day-to-day life.

She spent time in the family home observing relationships and gathering information about the living environment, the extent to which the daughter in the family seemed to be favoured over the boy, and the turbulent relationship between mother and son. She reflected on her own personal feelings about the mother, highlighting her unease at the disparity between hearing worrying things from the school but then receiving a warm welcome from her. Using a combination of analytical and intuitive reasoning skills (Munro 1999) Sky made sense of the concerns other professionals had about the boy's home life, which contrasted with the positive impression she formed upon first meeting the mother.

Sky hypothesised from her observations of the mother's behaviours and her acquired knowledge of the family history that she had transferred aspects of a previously abusive relationship with the boy's father into her relationship with him. The mother was perhaps attempting to re-enact unresolved experiences of her own earlier abuse, whilst identifying with and idealising her female child. Sky linked the dysfunctional family relationships to the mother's own histories of maltreatment (Iwaniec et al. 2006) and was therefore able to make sense of how the situation came to be abusive. She recognised that the child's basic 'need for safety, love, belonging and self-esteem' (Barlow and Schrader McMillan 2010) was directly negated by the dysfunctional 'descriptors' of the relationship (Glaser and Prior 1997: 323): that *'when she looked at him, she saw dad in him'*. Sky and the other participants regularly demonstrated how they used their knowledge and skills to identify and assess harm relating to intra-familial emotional abuse. From their observations of relationships and their assessments of parental behaviours, along with their knowledge of theories about family systems and attachment, they would formulate hypotheses about why and how a child was experiencing harm within the family home.

Sky seemed to signal from her narrative that this was a learning experience for her about emotional abuse, an experience that demonstrated to her that human relations are not necessarily 'straight-forward'; people do not embody child abuse in their every interaction and they are not simply 'good' or 'bad'. A mother is not automatically going to present as, or even be, a bad person. In addition to Sky's analysis of the family system, she also critically reviewed her own personal judgements, which is a challenging task not only intellectually but also emotionally. She confronted her own polarised splitting of what represented good, and bad. This not only entailed making decisions that may have led to important child protection measures being taken, such as breaking up the family or leaving the boy in a harmful setting, but it also involved reviewing her own practice. This impacted on the confidence she had in her own ability to form sound initial judgements about people. This self-scrutiny can feel uncomfortably critical, but is an inevitable feature of work with emotional abuse, where signs of abuse may not be immediately obvious and means of identification need to be interrogated and reviewed if necessary. As Munro (1999) points out, 'Changing your mind should be seen as a sign of good practice and of strength not weakness' (755).

In considering the 'narrative turn' of this telling of Sky's experience, it is useful to ask: 'for whom did Sky construct this story, how was it made, and for what purpose?' (Riessman and Quinney 2005; 393). Sky described her experiences to both the group and me, the researcher. She had the dual purpose of demonstrating her social work experiences to colleagues whilst also exploring my more academic concerns of unravelling the complexities of working with emotional abuse. She used story telling techniques, such as the turn of phrase 'it emerged' to relate to us how she worked out what was going on in the home and to move the telling of her story forward. It is a 'topically-centred and temporally-organised' (Riessman and Quinney 2005: 394) telling of a social work case. Events are selected, organized, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience (Riessman and Quinney 2005: 394). She encapsulated the mysteries of identifying emotional abuse and articulating the anxieties of accountability. She used familiar social work terminology such as referring to the parent as 'mum', '*needing CAMHS involvement*' and '*putting children on a plan*' as a short hand acknowledgement of the company she was in which nods to the groups' and the researcher's shared knowledge of common practice procedures. Psychological and sociological units of analysis were

incorporated in order to give the full picture of what the mother and son's psychological concerns were and how they played out in their relationship, and the wider family context.

Sky's discursive account to myself and the group, the repetition of mentions of her student status, and her reflective tone, suggested to me that it was important to her she was now regarded not only as an experienced practitioner, but one who has always been a reflective and curious one. Bourdieu's notion of 'cultural capital' (1973) is useful to consider here, within the social system of the focus group, Sky communicated her status through her accumulated experience in the field of child protection. Her cultural capital was dependent on the group and me picking up on the intended purpose of her story. As discussed in the case of Li, habitus is often acquired through conditioning via various mechanisms such as home life and education, and modelling from those around us. It also arises from the way in which we make sense of our experiences and through 'intelligent and reflexive adaptation to new circumstances.' (Sayer in Weatherell 2013: 105). Sky presented herself firstly as a new and naïve social worker, who subsequently navigated her way through the rites of social work practice, acquiring practice wisdom. In the context of a group of social work students being interviewed about their practice, this is a position imbued with social wealth.

Sky's emotions seemed, at a first listening, to be well contained. She made it clear this was something that happened in the past, and was no longer of any distress to her. There was a clear beginning, middle and end, a sense of order and logic to how events unfolded. On reflection, the surface calmness of her words tamed and codified (Weatherell 2013: 52) her feelings, which were, perhaps at the time of working with the family, far more emotive and raw. Sky may have turned the events of this situation over in her head at various points in years since it occurred, reflecting on what she later saw as a naïve reaction to human behaviour, and how she recognised her uncomfortable feelings. She perhaps encouraged herself towards a depressive position, accepting that 'good and bad are contained in the same object' (Hollway and Jefferson 2000: 169). As she pondered that only now, several years on, practical steps have been taken, the end to her story seems somewhat unsatisfactory in comparison to the strong coherent shape of the rest of

it. She seemed to trail off as she perhaps reflected on what she could have done differently.

Listening to Sky's account for a second time, I made space to hear what Sky had not made explicit in her account and reflected on some of my own concerns as a student social worker, the anxieties about accountability and what it means to be a social work professional; not wanting to appear incompetent or miss an important indicator of abuse. Her cohesive and clear telling of events gave little indication of any emotional response to the situation she may have had. Her story seemed quite understated considering the magnitude of encountering a desperate young boy who wanted to kill himself, but not feeling certain of how to make him safe. As a researcher who now has distance from these emotionally charged situations, I reflected on this over and over again, and the matter-of-fact way the social workers I interviewed often reported cases of personal suffering, as I had done too. This defended response by social workers is something I saw regularly in interviews: a resignation to the difficulties of the job, and a self-protecting mechanism for coping with an intolerable situation.

### *Self-efficacy and professional confidence*

As calm and contained as Sky seemed to be at the outset of my analysis, she appeared to me like the metaphor of a swan, kicking away under the surface, working hard to maintain an unflustered exterior. Many social workers identify with importance of demonstrating a 'professional' appearance, particularly with service users and managers, so that their self-efficacy reflects confidence in their authority and abilities. Confidence is an aspect of self-efficacy not conventionally regarded as an emotion as it tends to be thought of as a cognitive aspect of human functioning. Although it is a less 'expressive' emotion (Barbalet 2001), it is the kind of self-understanding required by social workers to take action like assessing whether a situation is significantly harmful to remove a child from their family home. Confidence has a temporal quality to it, as optimism from previous positive experiences can feed into the present. If a worker has worked successfully to improve a child's situation in the past, they may feel more self-assured about making decision like that in similar situations in the future. 'Confidence is therefore

a 'projected assured expectation' about the future, brought back and felt in the present '(Pixley 2002: 79). The experience of confidence provides 'a sense of certainty' about what cannot be known and therefore impacts upon a possible future. This is particularly important in cases of emotional abuse where immediate harm may not be obvious, and social workers are concerned about the long-term impact of a parent's approach to caregiving. In the case of Sky's situation, she felt that she lacked previous experience and consequently felt uncertain about what to do.

## INTERVENTIONS

The social workers in the DAT focus group felt that interventions with emotionally abusive parenting were at their most complex when discussing with families where the thresholds lie; in relation to what constitutes 'normal' parenting.

*Joanne: And the intervention as well. How do you intervene?  
Especially if it's the parents' world view that is causing the problems.*

*Sky: That's right.*

*Joanne: Like, what, telling me an adult's whole, whole world view is wrong..It's tangible that you can't hit a child. That's very tangible. How do you kind of intervene and say, "Well, you can't blame your child for everything. You can't pretend...you know, your bouts of tiredness are impacting on your children, because they think their mum's ill." It's not very tangible is it? So it's...that intervention is, um not as obvious.*

*Sky: It feels more personal, doesn't it.*

*Bryony: Yes.*

*Sky: Because you haven't got anything to base it on. You haven't got, "Look, this is what's happened. You've given your child a broken arm." It's more kind of you're going in and it feels more subjective when you say, "Actually, I don't agree with the way you're parenting." Then when it becomes like that, you can just get into a bit of a power battle.*

*Bryony: We just disagree on our parenting styles rather than actually, "This is harmful."*

This section of the focus group discussion acknowledged the everyday difficulties of social work when defining thresholds of emotional abuse alongside adults who do not think there are any major problems with the way they parent their children. The nature of emotional abuse includes acts of omission as well as commission, making it challenging to assess where the thresholds lie between emotional abuse and normative parental behaviour. Emotional abuse is a multifaceted phenomenon and is likely to be the result of a combination of harmful parenting behaviours. Interventions with it are arguably more complex than intervening with other kinds of abuse because without clear-cut boundaries for acceptable behaviour being set, parents may be unwilling to comply with the suggestions that follow their social worker's judgment.

However, a difficult reality of social work practice is that although in some situations a certain amount of empathic intervention, support and persuasion some parents can be supported to improve their care towards their children, in other situations no amount of therapeutic support can motivate a parent to change their behaviour if they are not willing to. This is when social workers are required to decide if the harm is serious and pervasive enough to use more coercive legal approaches to ensure the care for the child concerned is improved.

## WORKING WITH THE LAW

Bryony, as one of the more experienced members of the focus group, responded to Sky's concerns about her perceived naivety in detecting emotional abuse.

*Even when you are experienced though, because I...I've sat in front of judges, when I've tried to, you know ...and they've literally said, "Well where's your evidence?" and I'm like well "**Look** [emphasises 'look'] at these children" [laughs slightly] If I was able to say, "Oh, yes. Here's the bruise they received on their **soul** that day." But judges, laws, the law is set up to want physical evidence of what...and, and I remember giving evidence and saying, "well you know, you know those people that have mental-health problems and end up in crime or in violent relationships, well, you know this is what this environment will lead this person to. But because it's in the future and you can't always see it there and then, although you can in little, and as a social worker, I guess, I find it difficult because I guess we're not like a trained psychologist. And although you can see things there, you have to stay within your remit. And I think I get a bit concerned I guess about how we're not getting psychological reports anymore because I think that could back up quite often our,*



*although they just write what we have written, [draws in breathe and laughs slightly] sometimes they would have the clout to say, "Well, actually this child's attachment style is like 'this' and that's as a result of 'this'." Whereas although we can say we have concerns about the attachment, I don't feel we're qualified enough to say, you know [softly], "They've got an attachment issue, you know, they've got a dis...organised [almost inaudible and another participant coughs]...attachment or whatever," because I don't feel we're qualified enough. I don't feel qualified enough to say that. You know? Really difficult to prove. In court especially. I think we have children on child protection plans for a long time where emotional abuse is evident.*

During this quote I have paid particular attention to the way in which Bryony used the level of her voice and interjections, which seemed to me placed emphasis or enriched her account. Despite all of the knowledge and experience Bryony has amassed over her eight years as a social worker she still felt unable to use it to demonstrate emotional abuse in a legal setting. *"Oh, yes. Here's the bruise they received on their **soul** that day"* summed up her frustration at being aware that emotional abuse is impacting on a child's emotional wellbeing, but feeling unable to produce tangible evidence of it as *'the law is set up to want physical evidence'*. She went on to describe the predicted outcomes she envisaged for a child living in their current harmful environment, which is based on a combination of experience and theoretical knowledge;

*'well you know, you know those people that have mental-health problems and end up in crime or in violent relationships, well, you know this is what this environment will lead this person to.'*

Bryony used her intuitive and analytic skills here to assess the possible risk to the child's future. Risk assessments of likely harmful outcomes may be disregarded in emotional abuse cases, as they are not evidence of significant harm. Evidence of a child experiencing actual harm is understandably favoured over speculations about potential harm. In addition, harm may be offset by factors of resilience, or unforeseen positive influences in a child's life. Along with her own perceived lack of expertise, Bryony expressed her sense of inadequacy in being able to help the children she worked with towards achieving improved outcomes.

*"They've got an attachment issue, you know, they've got a dis...organised [almost inaudible]...attachment or whatever," because I don't feel we're qualified enough. I don't feel qualified enough to say that*  
,

Bryony spoke softly, which seemed to emphasise her shame about not feeling competent enough to make theoretically informed judgments. This was a response echoed by many participants during one to one interviews. They often felt they lacked the expertise to effectively use the theories they were familiar with to legitimise interventions with emotional abuse in a more formal setting. The almost uniform response in this small study was that attachment theory is useful for identifying problematic relationships, but should be used with caution in a legal setting. Physical evidence was deemed more appropriate.

*Tom: I think you've got to be careful if you're going to be using theory. I think you need to be far more ... in court you need, the evidence you're using needs to be far more tangible.*

Li explained how use of theory can be detrimental to securing support and resources for a family, moving the focus from the child at risk to an altercation between professional about ideas;

*....you have to be very careful. If you put in your statement a theory or you link it with a theory, you're very likely to be cross-examined and pinned down to the ground...normally the lawyers ... they would try to find a counter-theory that would suggest exactly the opposite. So you would get into a debate about theories in court, when actually that's not the focus; my focus is to gather information about how the child has developed...*

There seemed to be a sense amongst some of the social workers I interviewed that the legal process is an intimidating one. They appeared anxious about the seriousness it conveys; fearful that they would be scrutinised and found to be at fault. This fear not only has repercussion for the children and families they work with, but also for the individual social worker's sense of being an authoritative and competent practitioner.

*Theresa: because dad has got a really fierce barrister that they've shot through my Section 7 report, which was well over 30 pages ... and it almost feels like in some ways the court had sort of scrutinising the local authority as well. Like 'what are you doing?' I can understand that to a degree, 'are you really going to do what you say'? So I can understand there needs to be some review process. But, yeah, that one is tricky.*

Rather than entering legal processes to secure better outcomes for children, social workers described it with feelings of uncertainty and worries about judgement of

their practice. To an English social worker the phrase 'children's judge' normally evokes a set of particular associations including formal dress codes, professional conduct in formal courtroom settings, and the exercising of powers (Cooper 2000). The system is set up to create an environment that is formal and adversarial. This is in contrast to the experience of social workers in other countries, such as France where the family courts system is regarded as informal, accessible, inquisitorial, welfare based and negotiative (Cooper 2000: 98). During interviews social workers often alluded to the antagonistic and combative nature of attending court and having to be cross-examined by a defence barrister. The research I carried out supports previous research that indicates that although the law shapes social work practice and provides social workers with powers and duties, as well as boundaries for practice, there is 'often a huge discretion on ways to practice within those limits' (Brammer 2007: 12). For professionals who are confident in use of law, it can be an advantage but it can inspire fear in social workers who feel 'up against' other professionals who seem to be better equipped to use it (Brammer 2007: 12).

Social workers I interviewed seemed to expect to be undermined and outwitted in court. They described being asked to explain decisions made about families on behalf of the local authority, which may have been made long before they became involved in a case.

*Bryony: I remember when I was giving evidence, her barrister was sort of asking me questions about the decisions that had been made about her childhood and she was of sort of a similar age to me and he was sort of going "yes, and on this occasion do you think..." you know, and I sort of had to say "well I don't know, I was seven at the time that decision was made so I can't answer that, I can't answer your questions there I'm afraid, sorry".*

This was a defended response by Bryony who, to me, seemed to feel antagonised and under personal scrutiny from the barrister questioning her about the historical chronology of a case that she did not have knowledge of. Bryony took her opportunity to point out the irrelevance of the question, and rejected the possibility of responsibility on her part. She refused to take the blame for decisions made before she became involved with the child.

Increasingly the law is required to judge the general quality of social work, whether it be in court, in case conferences or by a public inquiry (Parton and Martin 1989;

2003). 'Legalism' has developed out of concern about failings of the child protection system. Many enquiries have indicated that social worker 'attitudes, knowledge and use of the law' (Parton and Martin 1989: 35) in response to the risks presented have been inadequate, and many tragedies are preventable. Legal procedures such as the cross examination of a social worker's judgment perhaps provide a sense of a 'solution' to the problem of poor social work practice. Reasons for criticisms about social workers vary, but the overall impact of scrutiny does seem to 'dent the confidence of social workers' (Parton and Martin 1989: 34). Their sense of authority and status remains low (Parton 2004) and they feel poorly equipped to defend their assessments. In the case of children experiencing emotional abuse, this is particularly apparent.

When I reflected back on the language Bryony used, I noticed that her passion for representing the needs of the children she worked with was reflected in her use of emotive language. Her sentence '*the bruise they received on their **soul** that day*' is one I have repeated during presentations of my research to social work professionals and academics, and consequently became part of the title of this research. I have seen nods of acknowledgment and heard it repeated back to me during question and answer sessions when I am asked about the research. I think it is because it sums up the frustrations social workers feel at not being able to physically demonstrate the psychological suffering they witness.

There is, at times, a contrast between the language and aims of the legal system, and the social work profession. The approach of some social workers, like Bryony and Fiona, is embodied in phrases used during interviews. I have wondered whether social workers are professionals who have a more intuitive, relationship-based approach to their work, and struggle more with use of law and legal language. Use of language that evokes strong emotions and precursors to sentences such as 'I feel' are tolerated in the legal domain and can be used to demonstrate the bigger picture but they do not, of course, amount to sufficient provision of evidence. Additionally, expressive or florid accounts of family life can be distracting and be criticised for attempting to bias the views of the listener. Strongly narrative accounts also put the attention on the teller of the story, moving the focus away from the child. This can lead to the minimisation of more significant reasons for protecting the child.

This research indicates that social workers require greater support in preparing for assertively presenting evidence in court alongside other professionals. Being able to confidently convey why their observations have led to their assessment of a child as having a particular attachment style and how, for example, this influences potential future outcomes for them, is one such area that requires attention. In having a stronger knowledge of attachment theory and how to articulate their application of it, they may feel better equipped for justifying their professional judgments.

## INTEGRATING MORE 'LOGICAL' WAYS OF WORKING

From the conversations I had with Tom during our first interview, I identified him as someone who set very clear boundaries about the interview. At the outset he said he could allow forty-five minutes for it as he had other work commitments. The contained manner in which he described his reflective process, and kept his work and home lives separate tallied with this too. The way he spoke about his work, using phrases such as '*I realised quite young in my career*' indicated that he had a clear sense of progression about his work, and I could envisage him crossing over into the 'managerialised masculinist' category of social workers, who is one of those who tend to be front-line managers or higher, and who focus on rising rapidly up the ranks of an organisation (Baines et al. 2014). To me, at a first listening, the way Tom spoke about his practice seemed to embody confidence and power. I thought more about the following section of the first interview, where Tom talked about working in a court situation and how differently he spoke about that experience, in comparison to Bryony.

**I:** ***In working in a court situation and you've got evidence of levels of significant harm, would you say that drawing on theory...is a...?***

**Tom:** *No, I don't think, I think you've got to be careful if you're going to be using theory. I think you need to be far more ... in court you need, the evidence you're using needs to be far more tangible. I think you can have difficulties if you're going to talk about theory, you need to talk about hypothesis and this is one explanation, these are other explanations, so you need to be really balanced about how you use it. In evidencing I'm far more comfortable*

*being explicit about actual research. For example, I was being cross examined the other day and the advocates for the parents were saying, 'Look, the outcome for looked after children are really bad, you know, surely they're better off with my client.' And then I was able to quote, you know, the recent research that says, actually, children who've been harmed, who have been put in care, and then return home, do worse than those who just remain in care. Things like is really useful research, it's stuff that actually the judiciary don't always know, the parents don't always know, and that helps them understand, 'No, I'm not going to recommend that you're kids returning home because it's going to be worse for your kid in the long run. Not always but certain times, and this is the research I'm using.' And telling them. So not keeping it all close to me and keeping my powder dry. They need to know why I'm recommending what I'm recommending.*

Overall Tom spoke with an absence of the emotive language I had detected in Bryony's interview. He confidently described how he handled working in a legal arena, taking a confrontational stance to engaging in the legal arena. The phrase '*keeping my powder dry*,' is a military term dating back to days when gunpowder was used in battle. This evokes notions of going to battle, perhaps representing a combative style of working social workers adopt when entering the hostile territory of the legal arena (Braye and Preston-Shoot, 2006). Tom did not seem to want to appear to me as being anything other than adept at integrating research into his practice.

At times during the interviews with Tom I experienced a sense of hope that when adequate and relevant research is available to social workers they can use it to help them to build more solid cases of emotional abuse, and do so with greater confidence. During the analysis process I continued to explore my sense of disempowerment in Tom's presence, deliberating if this was related to a deeper sense of dissatisfaction with my own practice approach. My previous feelings of frustration and inadequacy at Tom's calm and confident exterior were perhaps a defended response to my own more intuitive approach to social work. To me, Tom seemed able to be emotionally detached in a way that I could not be.

I took this section of the interview along to a data analysis group attended by staff and doctoral students from the department in order to bring some alternative perspectives to the analysis process. The group members were as struck as I by

Tom's use of language and discussed whether '*keeping my powder dry*' was a typically 'masculine' approach. One student pointed out that there were plenty of female managers who approached work in this way too. Although social work can be construed of as a 'feminised' profession, workers who may, arguably, have more 'managerialised' ways of working also populate the workplace. Tom's was an approach social workers may feel the need to take when anticipating a professional attack on them, which may have deeply personal repercussions for the child and for their own self-efficacy.

Having subsequently used this piece of data in other group situations when discussing the research with professionals, participants are often divided over how they receive Tom. Some people finding his approach straightforward and reassuring, others deem it abrupt and lacking in sensitivity. Re-presenting the data always offers up new perspectives and stirs up different feelings in the individuals who read it. Over the time since carrying out the interview, by repeatedly 'reanimating' my lived experience (Thomson et al 2012) of this, and other sections of interviews, I have gained a greater appreciation of the density of potential meaning derived from qualitative data. This exercise also serves as an articulation of the complexity of each participant's subjective nature, and the various interpersonal dynamics that combine and react with one another, surfacing to produce new 'affective processes' (Thomson et al 2012: 310).

## CHAPTER CONCLUSION

This chapter set out to take a look in greater depth at the ways in which various aspects of social worker subjectivity influence the processes of identifying and evidencing emotional abuse. Working towards the best possible outcomes for children where there is no immediately obvious or easy solution is often the situation child protection social workers are presented with. A social worker's duty to authentically convey the raw pain of a child's experience is not always compatible with the structure of the current English child protection legal system. In addition to this, uncontained expression of emotion is regarded with suspicion in a setting where 'the law is reason, free from passion' (Aristotle in Adams and Patty 2010: 61).

Li's explanation of how she initially identified a case of emotional abuse was unpicked to exemplify the often complex social construction of interpreting the signs of invisible harm. Li demonstrated how a social worker might go on to build a case that meets the more conventional demands of law and policy. Bryony's indignant response to court processes represents a common struggle social workers experience; having born witness to volatile relationships, they try to relate this dysfunction to professionals who may appear unmoved or unconvinced by their emotionally-laden accounts. These situations may evoke emotional responses from a social worker who experiences a sense of failure and a silencing loss of power in the presence of an authority that refuses to recognise their attempt to advocate for an abused child.

Public accountability and social worker self-efficacy in relation to working with other professionals became a key theme in this chapter. All of the participants, and myself as the researcher, exhibited various defended responses to the difficulties of managing the complex tectonics of law, emotion, and public opinion in relation to child abuse. In distressing situations where parents are unwilling or unable to take responsibility for their behaviour, arguably no one is immune from affect. Where there is close proximity to 'troubled people in desperate circumstances' the 'risks of contamination are high' (Tydeman 2007: 174).



## CHAPTER 6: SUPPORT SYSTEMS

### INTRODUCTION

The previous two analysis chapters have indicated that individual social workers have unique characteristics that contribute to the way in which they practice. By noticing some of the defining features of different approaches it has been possible to draw some broader conclusions about how work with emotional abuse is carried out. This final analysis chapter explores the notion of support in the workplace in greater depth. It focuses on addressing the final research question, which asks for a consideration of the 'structural mechanisms' that help social workers process complex information about emotional abuse. It suggests that opportunities for supported reflective practice ensure that the identification and evidencing processes are carried out in a way that is self-aware, and therefore effective in addressing the underlying reasons for harmful parental behaviour.

In the first part of this chapter, the second interview with social worker Tom highlights his experiences of supervision and teamwork. There is a broader aim to gain a sense of how these mechanisms support practice. In the second part of the chapter the focus moves to the wider supportive function of peer support, with particular attention paid to the dynamic of and the discussion within the FST focus group. This exploration of how a team works together leads into an additional consideration of the contribution of environmental factors, such as office seating arrangements. How a factor like this impacts on the experience of being in a team, and their productivity is related to comments made during interviews with Bryony.

Finally, the chapter considers external therapeutic approaches as a possibility for providing group opportunities to reflect on practice with emotional abuse. The aim of this chapter is to gain a better understanding of how the social workers who were interviewed used the support available to them to make informed assessment of cases, intervene effectively and review their progress in their work with children and families. It also identifies the limitations in support, which can occur, and the potential adverse effects of these on practice.

## TOM'S EXPERIENCES OF SUPERVISION AND GROUP SUPPORT

In listening out for general themes in between the first and the second interviews it could be suggested that Tom has a very assured, 'managerial' approach (Baines et al. 2014) to his social work practice. He had volunteered for an interview without any prior knowledge of me, unlike other participants who were recruited after taking part in a focus group, or already knew of me. He seemed keen to assist my research by contributing his perspective to what good social work practice ought to look like. Tom indicated in his first interview that his very self-assured approach to constructing and demonstrating evidence of emotional abuse enabled him to support children and families more effectively.

Tom said the capacity for reflective practice did not exist in the social work office. He indicated that when he needed additional support, it was his team rather than his manager that provided him with the help he needed to do his job effectively. He created personal space to critically think through the more emotionally difficult aspects of cases in the contained timeframe of his drive to and from work. Tom's vehicle was a nomadic and solitary solution to meeting his need for reflective space. This practice is akin to Ferguson's (2009) notion of the containing function of the car, as a 'fluid container' for the processing of personal troubles' (Ferguson 2009: 275). In considering this I revisited an extract from the interview referred to in chapter four, using the listening guide to consider what Tom had said within the broader cultural context of social work practice. I reflected on Tom's repetitious insistence that it was necessary for him to find reflective space somewhere other than work.

*'You don't get that. You need to find, I think, your own personal mechanism to be able to do that. I don't think it's something that professionally you're going to get. I know that's not ideal but realistically you're not going to get it from work. You need to find somewhere else where you're going to get that.'*

Experiences derived from my own practice, and the views of the social workers I interviewed led me to conjecture that reflective supervision was an aspiration, but not a reality of statutory social work practice. The ability to reflect in action is regularly highlighted in the literature as key to emotional regulation in practice. (Morrison 2008; Schon 1983). However, the 'absence of emotionally informed thinking spaces' (Ruch 2007: 372) in social work organisations is a concern that

has been previously raised in research findings. In spite of repeated calls for it as a necessity to quality practice, reflective practice seems challenging for organisations to implement. As Tom went on, he dismissed reflective space as a viable aspect of his one-to-one supervisory relationship, and spoke positively of his very 'functional' team as a substitute for this.

Tom's strong sense of 'unentitlement' (Orbach 2008: 40) to a supportive and reflective supervisory relationship was striking and it impacted upon me. I readily internalised his belief that reflective space was not '*something that professionally you're going to get.*' Perhaps, as a counter-transference response, I began to experience a sense of defeat and 'wrongness' (Orbach 2008: 40) in promoting the exploration of emotional support and nurture of social workers by their managers and their employing organisation. I found myself questioning the function of the research I was carrying out, and my ideals about exploring the social work experience in order to contribute to better practice. I reconsidered whether it was worth aspiring to improve the profession response to work with emotional abuse. How can it be possible when, at the centre of it all, employees' need to be listened to and to process difficult information remained unacknowledged and unmet?

The second interview with Tom took a different shape, as he seemed to be more engaged with the interview process than he had in the first one. He took less of an instructive approach to talking about the role of the social worker. He seemed unhurried and less concerned about how long he had to spare to talk to me. Tom conveyed his time to me at the start of the interview by asking me some general questions about the progress of the research and future plans. This could have been for any number of reasons: he may have had more time to spend with me or perhaps he was more familiar with me, and the interview situation. Perhaps events occurring in the hours leading up to our meeting may have had an impact: or it could have been that he had reflected between interviews and had decided to revise his approach.

The following interview extracts focus on Tom's reasoning processes in relation to the issue of reflective space in a one-to-one supervisory context and the wider notion of team support. Below is the first of three key excerpts in this section from the second interview with Tom.

Tom: *I'm sure if you talk to your colleagues ... the people you've already spoken to about their experience of supervision they experience of management it's going to be very mixed. The best managers in my view are ones that ask questions of their workers and don't just take things and ... or get ... give them stuff to do. Think about what makes good social work practice with families shouldn't really be any different in our relationship with us and our managers and if we're looking at things like clearly the cumulative harm ... you know, for example ... it's a phrase that I use a lot which I learnt in my previous job about the research, about the long term effects of, you know, relatively minor incidents, to get a worker skilled enough to recognise that you need time in supervision to then have someone who can ... manager who can step back from what's going on for that worker who can't maybe see the wood for the trees and think, "What's the long term impact of all of these things? What's actually going on for this child? Where's the chronology? Can I see? Let's do your chronology together."*

**I: *It sounds like more a case of management culture than anything to do really necessarily with the nature of the work or the workload.***

Tom: *It's an excuse. We use it as an excuse I think. We use, "I'm too busy," as an excuse I think. We can't afford not to do it because we get it wrong and we probably create an awful lot of work for ourselves by keeping, "I'm too busy to do..." For example in talking about ... you know, the person we were talking about before or my observations of colleagues who work all the hours god sends to do the job, are they more effective than those who don't? I wouldn't say that they are, I'd say that there's a management issue going on there. What is that worker doing that actually may be done a different way? What support's that worker getting to be able to be more regulated in what they're doing, more considered, as opposed to rushing out on one crisis after another? I say ... I think that probably says more about the relationship that worker has with that manager and therefore that manager has with the rest of the organisation than it does about what that worker's doing. Yeah.*

**I: *So work based relationships are just central to the work that you go out and you carry out with families.***

Tom: *It's basic. It's bread and butter. It absolutely is. A competent skilled effective worker is going to be one that probably has at some point received a very effective relationship with their manager at some point. I wouldn't be the practitioner I am now if it wasn't for the manager I*

*had right at the beginning of my career who was almost an inspiration in the way that every supervision was basically formed of a ... you know, questions being asked of me versus the supervision I get now which is, "Tell me what's going on, I'll write it down and off you go." That may be something because I present as confident and all the rest of it and blah blah blah, she's making the assumption that I know what I'm doing and in fact she's actually never even seen me on a visit, I might be really crap and just very good at talking. They need to go deeper. They ... I think that we give ourselves excuses too often to justify not going deeper, not investing more because actually to do all of that is knacker, it's exhausting. To be emotionally aware attuned to your worker means that you need to commit a lot.*

I had asked Tom in the first instance to talk more about aspects of work raised during the first interview that were of interest to me; reflective practice and the nature of his supervisory relationship. In his description of what he considered a good manager, he seemed to be implying that this was the antithesis of his current experience. He cited his previous manager to be a good one, one who gets alongside the worker but can also draw back and ask questions in order to support them in gaining a more objective perspective. Using practical measures, such as producing a chronology of child's life, was one effective method of support. From our earlier discussions about using an EIP approach, I appreciated why Tom felt this kind of approach would help workers to systematically work through concerns.

He said that lack of time was just an excuse for managers not to engage properly with their social workers and he concluded that it was a wider organisational issue that *'says more about the relationship that worker has with that manager'*. It seemed too puerile to ask at the time whether their relationship was a trusting one, as it seemed evident that it was not. Tom reminisced about his previous supervision experiences describing it as *'an inspiration'*. His contrasting reflections on his experiences caused me to consider the important role of trust in the supervisory relationship, particularly in promoting *'feelings of psychological safety'* (Ruch et al. 2014: 323). The messages about managerial priorities Tom was receiving left him feeling inadequately supported. Without some means of support, a social worker's psychological capacity to deal with the demands of their work may be significantly impacted upon (Munro and Hubbard 2011).

I had earlier shared my impressions of Tom with him, saying that he presented as a confident and self-assured social worker. He acknowledged this when his thoughts turned to his manager, who he said anticipated that his assertive demeanour in the office mirrored his work with families; *'she's making the assumption that I know what I'm doing and in fact she's actually never even seen me on a visit.'* Although Tom seemed calm, he expressed his sense of injustice and frustration in his choice of words. *'...never even seen me on a visit'* conveyed his disappointment at this lack of investment by his supervisor. Tom suggested his manager was not emotionally attuned because it was a *'knackering'* and *'exhausting'* task. The use of these adjectives expressed his fatigue with the job, and his frustrations at a manager who chose to distance herself from this experience.

In positioning Tom's relationship within the context of psychodynamic theory, it is possible to consider the centrality of 'relationality' to the subjective experience of social workers in a supervisory context. Tom's supervisor was the supposed container for his difficult experiences, but she was not fulfilling this function in a 'good enough' way. Tom resorted to simply turning away, accepting that his fears and anxieties would not be acknowledged. He found other ways of addressing his need for containment, either within the secure, but inanimate, context of his car, or amongst his more responsive and supportive team members. Even if Tom claimed to be satisfied with this arrangement, I remained uneasy. His repetition of his manager's inadequacies, and his insistence that he was surviving any way, signalled to me that even if Tom was managing well in his work, he was clearly dissatisfied about it and suffering as a consequence. As the interview continued as I asked Tom to expand on his earlier experiences of support.

**I:**        ***So do you think your earlier experiences have kind of in a way built you up and kind of compensate for a deficit that you have now in some ways in...?***

**Tom:**    *Yeah, I mean I ... those needs ... I don't get any need met by my manager in terms of what I need which is that reflective critical discussion, all the rest of it. I need to find other avenues – peer support. I have that within the team, I've got a very strong team where that is within our culture which we've made that our culture. No thanks to our manager. Our manager kind of benefits from that, but all of us as individuals ... it's not that we're more effective as social workers than our colleagues in other teams, but we've been able to bind a culture together where we do a*

*lot of joint working, we do a lot of joint visits, we do a lot of that ... kind of that stuff what happened in my previous job together, so we don't feel threatened by that, where we share research, we share ideas, we go for lunches together and do group supervisions together. There's a team identity that's one based on mutual trust and safety and other teams may not have, so that makes us effective, that makes us resilient.*

***I: So in spite of that kind of lack that you as a team experience in supervision you're still able to be a high functioning team and ... because you're ... is that something that you feel that you've brought to the team or are there other people that have had similar experiences to you in the past that they've ... it's a lucky draw that, you know, you've got this group of people that have managed to bring those other experiences together.***

***Tom: Well, we've been very fortunate. There's a couple of very strong characters in the team who buy into what's going on and that's helped embed a culture within the team that new people coming in ... they don't really have much of a choice, they have to go into that because the team's stronger than the individual and they may be resistant a bit about that, they may stay on the outside, but eventually they come into it and they see there's actually a lot to be gained from it. I don't think it's anything that I in particular have built in. I think in one way our manager's been very good in just letting us get on with it in that way and I think she'd be a very good manager for younger more inexperienced workers who do need that sometimes, "You need to do A, B and C," and that's where her skill set is. It's not, "Let's go a bit deeper," because she's actually very busy and maybe if I was in her shoes as a manager I probably wouldn't do that stuff either because there's only so much you can invest and in her head she's trying to remember the names of 300 kids, so how could she possibly go and look at what the individual staff members are doing and investing in that? It's difficult.***

Tom responded to my reference to his earlier positive experiences, by refocusing on his current manager's inadequacies. This was the first point at which he directly mentioned his 'need' not being met and I thought acknowledging this deficit could be a sign of his defences receding slightly and a show of willingness to express vulnerability. I wondered too if I experienced some counter-transference, as for a moment I felt I was his inadequate manager who he felt he could not trust and was failing to support him. He then went on to qualify this admission by reasserting the

dominance of his '*very strong team*' within which there was a core value of '*mutual trust*'.

Tom expressed a need for deeper reflection but demonstrated ambivalence about engaging in it in the moment. The rigidity of Tom's responses led me to feel that if I offered an alternative point of view it would be met with similar resistance, and the interview would end in an awkward cul-de-sac. Consumed by what he considered to be his unmet needs, I saw a familiar split emerge: the useless manager versus the well functioning, motivated social worker. As he fought to reconcile his emotional reactions by picturing his supportive teammates, and making excuses for the manager's deficiencies, the split deepened.

It seemed that when asked to discuss difficult situations, Tom found it challenging to engage in thinking about the painful reality in the absence of a mechanism that he felt would support him better if it were present in his work. He defended against his feelings, and about the more distressing aspects of his practice by repressing his over-whelming emotions. 'Repression' is a particular kind of defence, conceived of by Freud (1937) who subsequently replaced it the notion of 'resistance'. At this stage in the interview, resistance best expressed my experience of Tom's response to considering the possible consequences of a poor emotional connection to his manager. Resistance can be, firstly, a conscious and rational response to anxiety. It can lead to wariness, and 'reluctance to consider alternative ideas or suggestions' (Trevithick 2011: 393). Secondly, it can be regarded to be an 'unconscious emotional barrier' (Trevithick 2011: 393). The deeper a person's psychological defences are, the greater the need for resistance to ward off their anxiety. Meeting my troubling questions about supervision, it could be suggested that Tom fought harder to shore up his wall of defence, adamant that he was getting what he needed elsewhere. During the interview it felt more appropriate to me not to push too hard against this resistance, but to allow Tom's exploration of the issues he felt were problematic.

During this interview as a whole, Tom depicted a united team, with new comers having to become part of it. He indicated that the team had to fill the gaps of a good manager. He did not suggest he was the un-appointed leader of the group, but I wondered whether this was the case. According to 'basic assumption mentality' (Bion 1961) there are several possible outcomes, when work groups are faced with



lack of leadership in situations of uncontrollable anxiety, which all involve members of a team switching allegiance to other leaders to guide them. Without interviewing the whole team it is too speculative to explore the type of 'basic assumption mentality' occurring in his team. He did however mention 'a couple of very strong characters' that perhaps supported him, in his promotion to informal leader, in reaction to the unsatisfactory management arrangement.

As the interview progressed Tom seemed to use the interview space as an opportunity to work through some of his frustrations with management. He stopped talking in the first person and began to use the pronouns 'us' and 'we'. He continued to talk positively about the team, finding comfort in locating himself in this supportive and containing group. He, ironically perhaps, conceded that his manager's unintentionally simplistic and directive approach of '*You need to do A, B and C,*' instead of a deeper, reflective stance can be '*very good*' for less experienced workers. This was presumably as newly qualified workers can be overwhelmed with considering the complexities of the role. There is some research evidence that indicates directive, rather than unstructured, supervision is preferred by less experienced workers (Carpenter et al. 2013). He began to empathise with his manager at this point by imagining what it is like for her, saying '*if I was in her shoes as a manger I probably wouldn't do that stuff either*', commenting that '*it's difficult.*'

Although we moved onto other issues, throughout the interview Tom returned again and again to the deficit he experienced in the provision of reflective space by his manager. He continued to qualify this concern by talking about how he or his team managed to compensate for lack of supervision. This is representative of a broader pattern of repetitive preoccupation during the whole interview. This, for me, demonstrates his internal struggle to reconcile the level of support he received with how this absence of reflective processing time may be impacting on his practice. The frequency with which he needed to return to the subject whilst maintaining that it was not really a concern alerted me to the possibility that Tom was avoiding the anxiety-provoking aspects of the situation. In a similar way to victims of trauma, repetitious behaviour is a common response to a situation that feels unresolvable. The individual is enabled 'to avoid fully addressing the traumatising experience' (Ruch and Murray: 2011, 436). It seemed that, as Tom tried to empathise with his

manager he continued to use the interview space to try and address some of these unspoken difficult issues.

Although Tom's other resources; his previous experiences, his work colleagues and his own reflective capacity, offered him some elements of resilience, according to my analysis, they were not, an adequate substitute for his poor supervisory relationship and the lack of structured opportunities he was afforded to be able to reflect in a supported way. Tom again and again returned to contemplate this lack in his support network. 'Lack is hard to bear, and tends to be unbearable when nurture and recognition are lacking' (Zeal 2008: 46). Although this thesis draws predominantly on psychodynamic theories, which focus on the use of concepts derived from theorists such as Klein, Winnicott and Bowlby, it is useful here to consider the psychoanalytic idea of 'Jouissance' originally posed by Freud and developed by Lacan (1994). Jouissance or extreme enjoyment, is the other side of lack. Jouissance is 'a signifier for being fully human' (Zeal 2008: 6) but originates from the Freudian idea that every drive is a death drive. Jouissance becomes potentially harmful when its darker side, lack, is denied. The psyche seeks relief from the tension of this, and may become subject to a destructive repetition of lack.

In the context of the demands of statutory social work, highly competent workers may seem to be 'coping' with the difficult circumstances of their work with children and families. Without a reliable environment to safely acknowledge and work through some of the more emotionally painful aspects of the work, a sense of 'lack' may become a preoccupation. From this, a precarious psychological working situation, for example, may emerge as social workers struggle to overcome the deficiencies in their psychological support network. My thoughts returned to the case of Victoria Climbié, whereby apparently skilled and capable workers were not responding effectively to clearly distressing situations. I cannot comment on the direct practice with the children and families the social workers I interviewed work with, as I was not party to it. However, Tom's unresolved and traumatic repetition of the circumstances of his supervisory arrangement, driven by what it lacked, seemed significant and offers some insight into the experience of social workers who are not receiving adequate support.

An aspect of working effectively with parents who emotionally abuse their child is to promote reflexivity and encourage them to mentalize. However, from what I had

heard from Tom about his relationship with his manager, I wondered about her capacity to mentalize about Tom's need for understanding and empathy. Tom said the more attuned supervision he experienced earlier in his career had given him an ability to find ways to compensate for it, and he seemed to have an empathetic understanding of the restrictions posed for his manager in her role. A newly qualified worker without Tom's prior experiences and ability to compensate in some way for his lack of support might also feel undeserving of empathetic attention from their manager. If they did not experience it early in their own professional journey, what capacity did they have to provide this for the families they work with? Newly qualified workers without supportive supervisory relationships could unwittingly find themselves in difficult situations without the psychological capacity to even process how emotionally complex it is, let alone respond to it effectively. To be able to 'simultaneously retain a focus on the child and in particular their internal world, whilst managing the competing contextual demands arising from the unexpected nature of practice' (Ruch 2013:15) is a skill that requires assistance in its development.

It is important to understand how social workers interpret their individual roles within an organisational systems and their relationship to its culture (Munro and Hubbard 2011). This is particularly critical in situations where social workers are addressing emotional harm. This is because the supportive psychological mechanisms available in the workplace have an accentuated role in supporting the difficult work social workers do in recognising the signs of emotional abuse and working with the nuances of harmful intrafamilial relationships. If an organisational system has the remit of addressing the support needs of abused children, but has a poverty of resources, be it in terms of time, money or psychological support, this will surely have consequences for those who work within it. Social workers may assume have their support needs met is not a priority for their managers. They may come to feel unentitled to support and mistrustful of their managers, who have an overly directive approach which does not promote reflective practice, or demonstrate genuine interest in the social worker's practice (Turner-Daly and Jack: 2014).

Less experienced workers may quickly become overwhelmed with counter-transference emotions and consumed with building defences against difficult

feelings they are unable to deal with, searching for alternative, less effective ways of compensating for the lack in the support they require but are not receiving.

The discussion between us continued as Tom described how a lack of empathetic and containing supervision can impact on social workers' capacity to carry out their job and their level of self awareness around psychodynamic processes.

*... as for professionals, we want to be stimulated by what we do. If we're just going from one crisis to another it gets just very weary. We get very tired with it, but actually if you're in an environment that's promoting critical thinking, that's promoting making your brain think about what you're doing and also creating the time to think about these questions you can be a lot more stimulated, you can keep the passion, you can keep thinking about, "Why is it that I'm doing this job?"*

*So when you come out of a horrible visit and you feel like shit you can talk about it to your colleagues, you can talk about it to your manager maybe if you've got the relationship with your manager, but it all comes down to as shit as I feel 'now there's a kid in that house who has to live in that environment', so you're still keeping that empathy for the kid because when you're under pressure empathy and understanding is one of the first things to go, so if we can keep that we keep focused on the kid, so we're coming back to the nuanced behaviour such as emotional abuse by being aware, "What does the day to day life look like for this child?" We're investing in that child. Same way the manager's invested in us, we can invest in that child. That's the ideal because there's an awful lot of mirroring and transference ... counter-transference that's going on and I think we're not really paying enough attention about that and I think we should be doing more of it.*

Tom talked about the importance of being adequately supported in critical thinking, rather than becoming work weary and consequently engaging in unhelpful psychological processes. As the interview progressed, alongside these observations, Tom used the words '*horrible*' and '*shit*' to accentuate the specific emotional difficulties he experiences in the job. I noticed in this second interview, unlike the first, Tom swore or used adjectives like this occasionally, when he wanted to convey the depth of his feelings about a particular situation. It was a departure from his quite contained presence and I attributed this to him wishing to demonstrate the rawness of his feelings about the situation, for greater impact. Whether the intention was to shock, create impact, or was a genuine emergence of his distress, I considered the possibility of secondary anxiety (Menzies-Lyth 1960) which workers may feel when begin to explore issues that distress them. Social conventions can fall away and obsessions can become over-whelming when they

remain unresolved. During the course of the interview, discussions about Tom's supervisory relationship had become a sticking point, and his need to express his frustrations about its inadequacies became central.

When taking an overview of the entirety of the two interviews with Tom, I noticed that examples of specific cases in his day-to-day work were not mentioned. Whilst some other social workers, such as Li or Fiona spoke vividly about children and their personal concerns about them I did not form a strong sense of the emotionally abusive scenarios and occasionally I was privy to his thoughts on experiences of the child. He seemed not to be, on the surface of it, overwhelmed by the difficult emotions of working with abused children. I found myself replicating his way of engaging with me, and I looked for a more 'logical' response to his narrative. I latterly wondered why I did not push him with questions such as 'can you think of a case of emotional abuse where this lack of support has impact on you?' rather than commenting on how useful his early career experiences must have been. My counter-transference response to Tom's approach was to mirror the conversational stance he seemed to prefer (Nicholls 2009), so that he would be able to retain the feeling of being in control of his work, and the interview situation.

This led me consequently to wonder what my 'symbolic function' (Zeal 2008) as an interviewer was to Tom. I am certain Tom wanted to help me and make a contribution to research, but as I was 'drawn into' his inner world during the interview, I began to slightly lose my sense of self and purpose. Perhaps it is more helpful first to consider what Tom represented, as a symbolic function to me. To me he was someone who appeared, on the surface, to have the answers to what seemed to me to be the difficult questions of working with emotional abuse. However, a deeper analysis of the interview led me to proposition that Tom's own lack of support, and unheard anxieties had led to him building some defences to protect himself. A very certain and assertive manner perhaps shielded him from fully experiencing difficult emotions about the extent to which his own needs were not being met. His brusque business-like approach and use of military language (as outlined in chapter five) left me wondering about whether he had this impact on other people, and perhaps the children and parents he visited. The initial influence of Tom's apparent ease with identifying and evidencing emotional abuse was to throw doubt on the value of my research. Not all, but perhaps some people, may

experience the 'disarming' effect he had on me. It is possible that he was psychologically defending against the fear of what might happen to his practice, and was at times quite literally going into battle to defuse the problem or issue he was confronted with.

Use of psychoanalytic methods to interrogate Tom's, and other social workers' responses to me, has led a key theme to emerge. One of the most significant challenges for social workers in work with emotional abuse is processing the emotional impact of it. The creation of reflective spaces can promote trusting relationships between social workers and their managers (Ruch et al. 2014). This, in turn, offers the opportunity for workers to develop supportive relationships that enhance their practice. It is associated with the reductions of negative outcomes for social workers including 'anxiety, depression, somatic complaints, depersonalisation, and emotional exhaustion' (Mor Barak 2009: 10). The wellbeing of social workers is essential for them to carry out their work effectively, and an organisation's 'duty of care for staff working in difficult and challenging roles is important in its own right' (Carpenter et al. 2013). In meeting the fundamental goal of responding to the emotional needs of children and families to children and families, reflective support to professionals is required.

## WORKING AS A TEAM

The activity of carrying out the focus groups offered me some insight into how groups of social workers come together to discuss the process of working with emotional abuse. The following excerpt comes from the FST focus group and was towards the end of the forty-five minute session. The group were all members of a team in the same local authority, which provided the additional aspect of team dynamic and processes, which the previous DAT group did not. There were five social workers present; Theresa and Sean were both interviewed individually before the focus group took place. The group shared experiences of their work with emotional abuse, often with reference to how the practicalities of everyday office tasks impacted on the nuances of their work.

At the start of the session, group members said that apart from team meetings they did not usually find the time to get together to discuss their cases in this way.

During the course of the session they shared experiences of working with emotional abuse. More practical sign-posting arose, such as offers of resources they might borrow from each other such as toys and interactive tools for direct work. At this point in the focus group, I was drawing the session to the end, and I asked them what it had been like to discuss their cases together in this forum. Four out of the five members of the group spoke during this extract; Chris, Theresa, Sean and Jessica:

**I:** ***I was just thinking how does it feel, and perhaps you can always email me after if you have any thoughts about it...but how does it feel to sit and talk about it, is it helpful? ...is it frustrating?***

**Chris:** *It is good 'cause I think when you're sitting, especially at the moment with the new kind of layout, you're not always sitting there with, I think back in the day, Gemma we all had set desks, we don't have that anymore. And I think if you do know people and this kind of stuff is kicking off it would be one instance you talk about and you don't have those kind of relationships with your colleagues. There's those daily kind of grind cases or, I think my manager said the grinder cases, that just kind of sap your energy.*

**Theresa:** *Exactly.*

**Chris:** *And your colleagues aren't there to pick you up and I think ... whereas if something dramatic's happened then obviously people are going to be like, 'my god that's awful' but if it's like your fifth visit and the child still isn't opening up, it's like difficult to communicate that to the person sitting next to you or ...*

**Theresa:** *Well you don't have much time to firstly reflect on it yourself, the emotional harm. The more subtle things.*

**Chris:** *Yeah.*

**Theresa:** *And then I find you do a lot of your own processing it you know, after work. At night time. First thing in the morning. (group laughter) And it all starts processing and you realise you haven't actually processed any of it and sometimes it does build up.*

**Sean:** *It's really good, sorry to interrupt, just having this forum, just hearing other people because then it normalises it a bit.*

*Yeah (general agreement).*

*Theresa: (Multiple speakers). Nothing wrong with me, we're all having the same struggles.*

*Jessica: And without going into ...but taking off from what Chris was saying, this is what we would do maybe over a cup of coffee at five o'clock when we were still in the old offices. 'That kind of has been a rubbish day, and this is what's going on with the case' and two or three people would just sort of turn from their computer and kind of have that time to sit and do a bit of that peer support and I think that's unfortunately one of the things that we have lost in the move. Um, obviously, and I agree, that it has felt good, I guess the frustration bit is actually my colleagues have always got that, they've always understood that I need that support and I've understood my colleagues need that support. But actually the bit that's missing is the management layer. And that's er... our supervision policy has changed. It should now be reflective supervision.*

Sean had first raised worries about hot-desking during our first interview, as mentioned in chapter four. He had described the 'non-territorial' (Hirst 2011: 768) nature of the working environment as having an inhibiting effect on him forming and maintaining relationships with his teammates. In this group interview, Chris broached it as something that he felt had left him without easy access to the emotional support he would like from other social workers. He referred back to a previous time when the office space was arranged by allocated desks with teams working in spaces together and together the group reminisced nostalgically about a 'golden age' of community (Gilmour 2009: 14) when they were able to get together after a hard day to share their stories. Hearing other people's stories of feeling alone with their worries, Sean interjected to say that he appreciated this normalisation of something he had felt was unique to his situation.

Jessica's detailed description of the ritual of the team turning away from their computers to listen to each other seemed important. Listening back to the group speak, there was a strong sense of them coming together to collectively support one another, both in the past and in the moment of the focus group. The embodied daily routine of community that Jessica described represented to me a 'spatial practice' which ensured "continuity and some degree of social cohesion" (Hirst 2011: 770). By talking positively about the past at the same time as participating in the focus group activity, I felt that I was watching a revival of this sense of community. I wondered also if this could have been the creation of a new



community based on nostalgia: the imagined existence of a close team in a bygone time. This process enabled the individual team members, self identified by Chris and Sean who had expressed a sense of struggling on alone, to feel like they 'fitted in'. At this point in the focus group the team members seemed to form a mutually agreed sense of collective identity.

The conversation was initially pleasing to me to listen to as it represented some hope that by initiating a team discussion about more effective working together there was a possible positive outcome for the research participants. During a subsequent listening to the interview, I re-evaluated my role in this analysis and allowed myself to consider the extent to which this was a performance for my benefit. For example, could it be that the group had demonstrated for me how close and supportive the group could be if external forces took responsibility for organising them? I wondered what would happen once the moment of the group interview had passed, and whether it was likely that things would return to how they had been before the focus group. I also wondered, if the old allocated desk set up had really been as supportive as Jessica's reminiscing had suggested; had the previous dynamic been so effective, would it be so hard to regain some ownership of her current space, and negotiate it in a new setting?

Reflecting on the contrasting description of the '*old office*' and the '*new kind of layout*', Chris and Jessica gave the impression of having power and a sense of ownership over the previous space, which they seemed to recall taking control of. They decided collectively when it was time for peer-support, without any mention of managerial input. The new space in their conversation seemed, in contrast, to have been 'done' to them and had an inhibiting effect; social workers were subjected to not only the construction of the organisational space but also how their social interactions with one another occurred (Halford 2004). The sociological geography literature suggests that the ability to 'own' and personalise one's own desk in the workplace enables workers to express their identities, as well as form and maintain relationships with their colleagues (Brown and O'Hara 2003). For Theresa, the security, intimacy and familiarity of an allocated desk arrangement enabled her to form similarly comfortable relationships with co-workers. This in turn facilitated discussions about '*the more subtle things*' in work with emotional abuse cases.

I thought back on my experiences in shared office spaces, which have consisted of both allocated desk spaces and hot desk arrangements. For me, the arrangement of desks had a less significant impact in terms of reflective peer support. My ability to seek help depended more on whether there was either enough time or suitable people available to talk to. At times I would have liked more functional team support in the sense of regular meetings, but achieving this felt difficult. I could not see how I could 'take charge' and overall it seemed like someone else's job to arrange it. Without such mechanisms pre-existing as part of the everyday working culture, it was too difficult to organise. Listening to the FST it sounded like that they had struggled to transfer their supportive team culture to new working conditions, but in the moment of the focus group they seemed very capable of reproducing it.

Using the listening guide to hear for a sense of culture and work place context, I noticed how the workers joined together in splitting their own 'good' intentions and potential to function well, from the 'bad' management system which had imposed these more nomadic uses of space upon them. I considered modern ways of working such as the introduction of hot-desking, outlined in the literature review, that are gradually being absorbed by the social work profession. This introduction of 'negotiation of urban space' that the FST experienced was more 'akin to vagrancy' than like 'the romance implied by nomadism' (Hirst 2011: 768). The discussion suggested they felt ill equipped to find reflective space in this new arrangement, and they consequently experienced isolation and an inability to initiate ways of functioning more effectively as a team. They were united in their shared dismay at 'the system's' failure.

The fearful feelings of insecurity the social workers in the FST group experienced when working with intangible and nuanced qualities of emotional abuse became magnified by the 'manufactured uncertainties' (Gilmour 2009: 123), that hot-desking and a more itinerant regime brought with it. Yearning for a golden age of community is a understandable human response when, whether as individuals or collectively, we no longer seem to be in control, or worse still lack the tools to 'recover and repossess control over the forces shaping our shared condition', (Bauman in Gilmour 2009: 124). Social relations are inevitably effected as a 'weakening of 'inter-human bonds' (Gilmour 2009: 123) occurs. A whole sense of a person's 'being-in-the-world', is undermined by this lack of certainty.

I considered the first interview with Sean, discussed in chapter four, during which he seemed despondent when it came to talking about specific cases of emotional abuse in his work. I detected a defended response to talking about something difficult and painful. During the analysis of the focus group data I revisited the idea that the reduced communication opportunities Sean and the other team members experienced had contributed to a sense of isolation and depleted energy levels. I wondered if the team in the group experienced a wider sense of reduced morale and 'ego depletion' (Baumeister et al. 1998) led to a culture where difficult cases were not discussed easily.

This loss of energy and motivation affected their ability to make connections with one another on an everyday basis. This also may have had an impact on already dwindling levels of confidence, which affected their abilities and willingness to engage in seeking out the reflective practice they needed. The '*daily grind*' cases that '*sap your energy*' further depleted the team's capacity as individuals to resolve difficult emotions. I optimistically hoped that the focus group provided a restorative function of sharing common experiences. Positive affective interactions can 'counteract the tired aspect of depletion and effectively replenish the depleted resource by the initial self-regulation' (Tice et al. 2007: 3040). This indicated to me that a sense of team is central for social workers in regulating their emotional responses to the job, building professional confidence and integral to overall personal resilience.

This finding relates to the experience of any social care work, but is of particular significance in work with child abuse where supportive networks crucially provide the space to reflect and reduce levels of stress. In work with emotional abuse where processes of identification and intervention are often sustained, complex and demanding, it seems essential that even if social workers such as Theresa did lie awake at night wondering about the '*more subtle*' aspects of emotional abuse, that she have the chance to turn to a colleague and share this experience.

### *Environment and perceptions*

Ways of working that inspire a sense of 'team' are an interesting concept to consider further in relation to reflective child protection social work with emotional

abuse. The literature review suggested that social workers require reflective opportunities and containing spaces to process complex information about the work (Ruch 2005a). Bryony described a different arrangement to her team-working environment to that of the FST. Hot-desking was technically the way her working environment was organised, but she described how her team was organised into 'units' so that members of the team who had varying levels of experience tended to sit at same 'pool' of desks in the office. During our second interview I asked her about working on emotional abuse cases, which involved the needs of young people. She spoke of her frustrations that young people experiencing emotional abuse were particularly vulnerable to having their needs missed; as a group they are regarded as less of a priority, and issues of emotional abuse are routinely ignored. I asked if her supervisory relationship helped manage her thoughts and feelings in relation to this, which led to the following response:

**I:** ***Is that the sort of stuff that you talk about in supervision or is it more of a... managerial situation...that you've got?***

*Bryony: ...generally I would say I've had regular supervision whilst at this local authority. But yes, I mean I would say it is a bit of both. It's looking at your caseload, why haven't these been done, you know, when they should have been type things, but you know normally we would go through each case and I would be able to discuss it and my thoughts on it. You know, I don't know how my new manager will be with supervision. I suppose it is different depending on the manager.*

**I:** **Yes.**

*Bryony: But yes, normally I'm just kind of given an overview of what I have done, haven't done, what I plan to do. I guess in the duty team it is quite nice that we are separated into three units and in each unit we have a senior practitioner as well.*

**I:** **Yes.**

*Bryony: So a lot of sort of informal supervision goes on and I guess that tends to be sometimes more valuable in regards to reflecting and stuff like that, you know, because often there isn't time in supervision. The thing is with, I think, with reflecting, if you have come back from a visit*

*you don't want to go "what I will do is I will reflect on that in two weeks when I've got supervision". You are thinking about it like there and then and you want to talk about it when you get back so it's quite nice, it's, although it is hot-desking here I think a lot of the teams have tried to retain a space.*

**I: Right yes.**

*Bryony: That they all sit together at least, you know, so that, because I just think that is invaluable. I can't, you know, okay hot desk, whatever, but a lot of people told me that in other local authorities they don't hot desk, it's just desks, they don't sit in a team. I just think that must be awful. You must be missing out on so much. You know, because for me, I've been a social worker for quite a long time and I generally, in my brain kind of thing, kind of know what I want to do or what should happen but nine times out of ten I just want to bounce it off of someone else to make sure. You know, I'll sit in the room downstairs or up here or whatever and just say, "yes, I was thinking this, does that sound about right?" and some people will go "oh, try this" and, you know, that makes a lot more sense whereas if your team wasn't there, I just think that's dangerous actually...*

**I: Yes, yes.**

*Bryony: ...to not have – and just to come back and have a whinge or a moan or to come out of a meeting or come out of supervision and go into something else and have a moan to the team. I just think that is all really important. But if you are sitting at a random desk to save a bit of money for the local authority, then you are not going to get that.*

**I: Yes. So that kind of informal peer supervision is what your main support is do you think or your main opportunity to reflect?**

*Bryony: Definitely, yes compared to formal supervision and that doesn't discount my manager that, you know, often that will include my manager. They sit with us in duty which is quite nice and also, you know, I can go to them at any time and discuss a case and in duty again, because it is quite fast paced and you can't wait for three weeks, you know, should I put this plan in place for this family, so, you know, I just think you get a lot more out of sort of corridor/informal supervision than you do sitting down formally and going through your cases really.*

**I: It seems, like you said, I'm not sure what the right term is, but the geography of where you are is so**

***important, you know, that's, having that like a secure base to return to...***

Bryony: Yes.

***I: ...and those familiar people who are doing a similar job and different bits of experience.***

*Bryony: Definitely, definitely, especially, well for me, and I've been a social worker for eight years, but for a newly qualified, what are you going to do if you are not sat near anyone that you know or, you know, and your manager is not on the same floor or in the same area, how are you ever going to know what you are doing really I suppose. That would be terrifying.*

Bryony indicated that her supervision was sparse in its reflective content. She said, however, that her sources of support from her manager and the team alike were nonetheless rich and sustaining. I wondered as she first began to speak if she was resistant to talking about this issue, unable to enter into discussing the shortcomings of her supervisory arrangement, as I hypothesised Tom had been. As this section of the interview unfolded, Bryony did not appear to be raising her defences; instead she differentiated between the type of hot-desking she experienced and a kind that seemed closer to the experiences of the FST focus group. What Bryony described she received was a clear sense of team, with support that was accessible on a moment-to-moment basis, with the promotion of more '*corridor/informal supervision*'. The literature review suggested that this kind of support could not replace the importance of a regular one-to-one reflective space (Ruch 2007). Although this arrangement seemed to work for Bryony it seemed unregulated and difficult to assess for its effectiveness for the whole team. I formed the impression that Bryony had worked for a number of years in a setting that she was comfortable with, and consequently felt settled and secure.

Bryony described what she had been told by people in other teams: '*they don't hot desk, it's just desks, they don't sit in a team*'. This type of hot-desking as experienced in other local authorities involved 'sitting at a random desk' and was regarded by Bryony as purely a money saving exercise. In its most functional sense I could not immediately see a difference in the organisation of space, and this is perhaps reflected in my response in which I tried to clarify her feelings about the 'geography' of the space. Bryony's sense of team seemed to transform her understanding of her sense of belonging within a set-up, which was in appearance

similar to the focus group's discussion about the arrangement of desks, but different in terms of how the space had been socially constructed. In this different interpretation of 'everyday ownership' (Hirst 2011) of space, Bryony described her team as having a structure where members had varying levels of experience and a culture embedded in their relationships that allowed for a free flow of support. If team members wanted *'just to come back and have a whinge or a moan'* this was acceptable, which differed to Chris's experience, he said *'your colleagues aren't there to pick you up'*. In an individual sense Bryony and Chris could be described as quite different personalities, and perhaps Bryony was more equipped to seek out support than Chris.

However, from the different ways in which Bryony spoke about her team it seemed she and the members of the FST focus group had interpreted the structure of the team and consequently the space they worked in very differently. Bryony's team, or her management appeared to have utilised the desk space more assertively and positively to benefit them. Consequently they enabled 'the realisation of greater returns on spatial assets' (Hirst 2011: 770). Bryony spoke in an upbeat way about her team, suggesting familiarity and closeness, only expressing some anxiety when she considered the possibility of the alternative hot-desking arrangement which involved not being *'sat near anyone that you know'*, which *'would be terrifying'* in particular for a newly qualified social worker.

The 'hyper complexity' (Halford 2004) of understanding these different interpretations and supportive outcomes of what appear on the surface to be very similar situations is not easy to decode. The meanings embedded in the cultures of the different teams are hard to elicit from interviews alone, and perhaps alternative methods of enquiry such as naturalistic observations of the workplace are required in order to gain deeper understandings of the differences of in team culture. The habitual routines, which promote a comfortable habitus for individual social workers, are deeply embedded in their everyday working lives. They are therefore difficult to articulate (Halford 2004). As Bryony spoke I felt she had the same ease and positive regard for her colleagues as the FST group had for one another. A key feature of the routine of going to work is for people to enact their social lives. Work is essentially about friendships and social identities, which are formed and maintained through 'spatial practices at work'. (Halford 2004:9). Bryony's was

obviously a different situation, with small adaptations in terms of management decisions, but it seemed that the relationships Bryony had developed were thriving, as she was able to access the support she needed with ease.

Space and spatiality became a 'vehicle of meaning' (Klotz 1992: 235) in the work environments the FST and Bryony described. It is intimately connected with identity. When organisational spaces integrate managerial control, as seemed to be the case in Bryony's team, the manager was less of an individual to attend supervision with, and more another team member to source support and guidance from. 'The exercise of resistance to managerial control' (Halford 2004:15) is not so significant.

In relation to defended behaviours, the psychosocial literature indicates 'we are *all* vulnerable and defended beings' (Gilmour 2009: 142). It is useful to notice the difference in Bryony's responses to the various situations we discussed. Using her reactions as markers, it is possible to distinguish between circumstances that caused her to raise her barriers to manage her distress, and others, with which she was relaxed, satisfied and seemingly undefended. Bryony did not demonstrate any resistance or resentment towards her manager or the organisation, as members of the FST team had. It was a contrast to her seemingly anxious and frustrated description of court work, as explored in chapter five.

## EXTERNALLY FACILITATED SUPPORT GROUPS

Quite often supervision does not address the long-term emotional impact that working so closely with child abuse can bring, particularly if management tasks are focused on procedures and timescales during supervision (Harvey 2010). The data demonstrated a clear and close connection between the individual social worker and how they work with emotional abuse. Social worker Li advocated for the provision of 'clinical supervision' during our interviews. Definitions of what constitutes reflective and clinical supervision are very close, and they are described as 'essentially emphasising learning from case work with a view to professional development' (Carpenter et al. 2012:3). Some international literature identifies clinical supervision as referring to a social worker 'voluntarily contracting for professional input and guidance outside of an agency framework' (Bogo 2006: 52). English research suggests that reflective one-to-one and group supervision may be



given by an external consultant (Carpenter et al. 2012), and in England, clinical supervision can occur within the institution, and other staff members from allied subject areas can supervise social workers located in interdisciplinary teams.

As discussed in chapter three, this was a resource Li had identified as acquiring for herself outside of the immediate work context, in relation to discussing how doing child protection work impacted on her. She felt that external support such as counselling had allowed her to reconcile her own personal struggles, which were in part connected with carrying out work with child abuse alongside her own experiences of witnessing domestic violence as a child. She felt that regular provision within the job of such support was important in order for all workers to examine and manage the impact on the worker and the families they work with:

*And hopefully at some point they will find it easy to offer us clinical supervision, even if it's every two months for somebody external to come and have ... I just still hope we will get to that stage where somebody from outside will come and they will pay 'cause we haven't got the resources. We have got the internal resources where you can refer yourself to the counselling sessions but again it's time limited. But just come every three months, I'm happy, every six months, come. I'm still happy to have that kind of space for two hours for myself and just say, 'this is crap, I can't stand this child anymore'. Or whatever related to my practice which would help me move on quickly.*

Previous research had indicated that as resources decline, social workers are less able to rely on supervision to provide professional development. It suggests that social workers will, as Li has done, seek clinical supervision or 'consultation' outside the organisation as alternatives (Bogo 2006: 55).

It is useful to consider the advantages of bringing group members together to discuss challenging issues concerning work with emotional abuse. Carrying out the FST focus group for the purposes of research led me to think about the additional 'formative' function such a space had offered the participants. It was an opportunity for them to share their insights and progress their thought processes around challenging areas of work with emotional abuse. The important difference between this session and regular peer support groups carried out in a social work office was that this was a one off opportunity for the primary purpose of gathering data, rather than a regular commitment. There are various models of peer support available to the profession. One option is the 'case discussion model' (Ruch 2007), underpinned by the Tavistock mode of child observation, which operates within a

set of specific boundaries. Participants have uninterrupted time to discuss specific cases, and the aim is not to 'defend' their practice. The space of the focus group, although different in its purpose and arrangement, offered a similar opportunity and provided a context conducive 'for the development of emotionally informed thinking' (Ruch 2007: 376).

The make-up and context of each focus group was quite different. However, like the case discussion model, they both offered participants the opportunity to discuss key concerns about working with specific cases or situations in relation to emotional abuse; including the problems associated with its intangibility, the contribution of subjective experiences on practice, and the difficulties that grow out of a sense of working in isolation. During the focus groups, sharing experiences of perceived weakness in practice allowed supportive opportunities to improve self-efficacy and reflect on specific practice dilemmas in relation to work with emotional abuse. Group members also addressed access to practical resources. They offered to share them with one another, opening up the potential, for those who were less accustomed to working with tools such as toys, to approach work with families in more innovative ways.

Recent research carried out by Jones and Allen (reported 2015) used 'action inquiry' methods to create 'solution space' methods. These functioned as a 'container for experiential learning' in groups, in order to draw on collective wisdom that supports more effective work in child protection settings. In operative terms the process the focus group engaged in were similar to those that may occur in a 'work discussion group' (Jones 2014:5). Peers from a team of social workers came together voluntarily and without the presence of a supervisor, but with an external facilitator. With the absence of the authority of a supervisor, the ideal function of such a group is that 'power and control issues are not present' and 'a mutual aid model can flourish'. The intended benefit of this peer support is that members will process issues constructively rather than 'sidestep issues with false-positive support' (Sulman et al. 2005: 293). Solutions are found by those who are most effected and closest to the issues that concern them. Work discussion groups can serve the purpose of supplementing individual one-to-one supervision and such opportunities are 'recommended as an efficient use of time and as a vehicle where social workers can learn from each other' (Bogo 2006: 53).

This particular method of peer support has been identified in one study as one of the most important factors in ‘determining job satisfaction levels of social workers’ (Sulman et al. 2005: 299). However, for longer serving employees, criticisms included it being described as redundant, repetitious and restrictive. Recent research indicates a lack of evaluations of the effectiveness of reflective practice groups (Jones 2014).

With regards to literature about the merits and short-comings of external supervision, it is useful to consider evaluations of the Scandinavian model of statutory social work supervision, which is quite different to that used in England. Internal, task-focused supervision is provided by the line manager and is combined with externally facilitated supervision (Beddoe 2012). The external provision is almost always described in the literature as a group activity run by an supervisor who is chosen either by the social workers themselves or in cooperation with managers (Bradley and Hojer 2009). It has become a prerequisite of most qualified positions and Swedish social workers ‘strongly uphold their right to external supervision’ (Bradley and Hojer 2009: 75). A comparative study of the familiar English model and the Swedish external model found that external supervision provided work related and emotional support, but only half of the social workers in the study believed that external supervision increased their knowledge about theory and research. They described experiences of bad supervisors being ‘too passive’ (Bradley and Hojer 2009: 78), lacking the ability to lead the group and displaying insensitivity to the group’s needs.

The two focus groups I ran appeared, to me, to be co-operative and supportive, which may not have been the actual experience of each member, nor would it necessarily be the outcome of a regularly occurring group. In the light of this research, externally facilitated peer support in the workplace is an area worthy of further investigation in relation to work with emotional abuse. One aspect of interest is how they are maintained, and retain their usefulness.

## CHAPTER CONCLUSION

During the interviewing process, social workers discussed the lack of reflective opportunities they experienced in the context of their one-to-one supervision

sessions. The analysis explored an unspoken but begrudging acceptance of a workplace culture of poverty in relation to work related support. Social workers drew predominantly on their peers and their external networks to work through the impact of the more challenging aspects of the work. Sean suggested that those who were less able to reach out and form relationships with their peers could flounder at work, feeling isolated, undermined and incapacitated when difficulties arose. Social workers who found alternative methods to contain and process their emotions in relation to the work drew on other, potentially inconsistent, and unregulated sources. These sources may offer social workers opportunities for unburdening, reflection and possibly personal development, but they were not linked to professional practice or were in any way formal reflexive spaces.

This research has explored the subjective nature of carrying out child protection work. Within this context it has been possible to scrutinise some of the complex interpersonal relationships social workers form with other people during the course of their work. How these relationships influence practice with respect to emotional abuse, such as assessment and decision-making, has been considered. The interplay between these relationships and how individual social workers engage on an empirical level with structure such as the law and social work procedures have been looked at in-depth. It is therefore very concerning that in spite of a body of literature that highlights the importance of well-informed, reflective supervision in such an environment, the requirement for effective workplace support continues to be neglected.

The relief with which some of the social workers took the opportunity of space to talk about their work and a listening ear to hear their concerns left me with a sense of inadequacy about the purpose of a research project that adds to an already highly persuasive chorus about the necessity of meaningful workplace support. I was equipped to share and reiterate their anxieties, but experienced powerlessness in my ability to facilitate significant change. Illuminating problems with the system felt at times compounds the distress that occurs from witnessing emotional abuse but feeling unable to do anything about it. I found myself at times worrying that the research might constitute only an interesting study into the use of psychosocial methods to explore child protection practice with emotional abuse, rather than also an evidence informed piece of social work research that can meaningfully influence

training and practice. Just as social workers need reflective supervision to enable them to reconstruct their affective and subjective responses into emotionally thoughtful considerations, I, too, needed the reflective spaces of my journal, the analysis panels, and supervision to begin to step back and identify what new knowledge and understanding could be produced through this research. Indeed, it took the process of my viva to enable me to take the final step of moving through 'findings' into an understanding of how these new understandings could be of benefit to the discipline and profession. It is these which will be considered in Chapter 7.

## **CHAPTER 7: WHAT CAN DEPTH EXPLORATIONS OF SOCIAL WORKERS' SUBJECTIVE RESPONSES TO WORK WITH EMOTIONAL ABUSE OFFER FUTURE PRACTICE?**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The main purpose of this research has been to articulate the more subjective processes involved in social work with emotional abuse, and to demonstrate how social workers' emotions, experiences and perceptions intersect with the more conventional and directive systems of statutory child protection work. How each of the social workers who took part in this research has negotiated their role as a corporate parent has been explored in depth. What it is like for social workers to draw upon their subjectivity during complex assessments and decision-making has been unpacked. It has been possible to gather knowledge that could contribute to future training, practice and research in relation to work with emotional abuse.

The project has been guided by the overarching research question, '*What can depth explorations of social workers' subjective responses to work with emotional abuse offer future practice?*' The research I have carried out indicates that it is essential to effective practice with emotional abuse that social workers are supported in understanding the contribution of their subjectivity to their work, along with their use of the more tangible tools of the job such as risk assessment models and checklists. This chapter reflects on the ways in which this occurs, before making recommendations for future training and research in the final chapter.

### **CHANGING CONTEXT**

This thesis has been completed in 2015-16 at a time when the context of English social work practice and education is changing. A government policy of austerity means continuing cuts to public services such as social work, placing further pressure on workloads and constraining time for reflection. There is an increased pressure upon educators to produce a workforce which is 'practice ready' for the demands of statutory social work as well as of high academic calibre (Narey 2014). The provision of student bursaries for established university courses has been

reduced, and there is a growing expectation that courses must reflect the need for social work students to be fast tracked into the workplace. This pressure on the process and content of qualifying social work education negates the importance of the time needed for graduates to become critically reflective professionals rather than simply being equipped 'with a bag of frequently-used tools' (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014). Following the 2016 UK referendum vote to leave Europe, there has been palpable concern amongst educators, researchers and social workers alike about the means by which work will be funded in the years to come. During periods of uncertainty about resources there is an inevitable, increased expectation on publicly funded professions such as social work to perform efficiently.

## BEING A SOCIAL WORKER

A defining duty of child protection social work is to avert and reduce the risks of abuse. Laws, policies and professional standards guide social workers' practices in achieving this, and such mechanisms offer statutory social work a more certain narrative of professionalism. It has been posited that social work should embody the threefold role of 'the social worker as a practitioner, the social worker as a professional, and the social worker as a social scientist' (Croisdale-Appleby 2014: 85). The broader political, academic and professional context suggests, however, that the role of a social worker as a social scientist and as a professional may be retreating. Being a 'proper' social worker seems now often to entail 'doing' practice tasks in a logical way according to law, policy and professional codes of conduct provided by a regulatory body (Webb 2015).

This research indicates, however, that professional identity cannot be defined by simply following agendas set by authorities which exist to narrow down the narrative repertoires (Webb 2015: 8) of what it is to be a social worker. It demonstrates that under the surface of assessment frameworks and rational procedures lie the complex and multiple approaches individual social workers take to carrying out their day-to-day work. The role of social worker exists as 'one of the multiple subjectivities that a person occupies across their day-to-day lives' (Wiles 2012: 4). No one enters the social work profession as a blank page. In addition to this, professional identity is not a stable entity, 'it is an on-going process of

interpretation and customisation which is shaped by contextual workplace factors' (Webb 2015: 3). This research exposes the inner strata of social workers' experiences, their empirical response to the anxieties, chaos and uncertainty that the professional assessment of insidious and intangible harm can bring to carrying out everyday child protection tasks.

## THE PIVOTAL ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKER SUBJECTIVITY

The research indicates that an individual social worker's use of self plays a crucial role in how they decide whether a situation is emotionally abusive. A wide range of factors may influence how social workers react to their work with emotional abuse, such as cultural background and previous supervision experiences. Consequently individual social work practice approaches will vary. This research demonstrates, through a collection of personal narratives, some of the ways in which different social workers attempt to reconcile the expectations they feel are upon them when acting as a corporate parent to a vulnerable child. It acknowledges the complexity of the presence of primary carers, who may feel undermined by the social work intervention, and in need of support themselves.

What this research offers is a critical perspective on reflexive processes. It demonstrates how the social workers who took part in this research were continually searching for professional identity. Being a statutory child protection social worker is far more complicated than the role as agent of the state. This carries with it feelings of fear and anxiety, particularly in situations where social workers are accountable for working with aspects of harmful interpersonal relationships which are not easy to see and evidence.

At the start of the PhD process I considered myself to be more of a social work practitioner than a social scientist. After several years carrying out research work this status has arguably altered. The way in which I process information about practice comes far more from a theoretical and distant position than it did when I was fresh from work with emotional abuse and experiencing the challenges of working with it directly.



During the process of being a social work researcher I have become something of a vessel for the various anxieties and fears of participants and have experienced various counter-transference responses. I have needed to overcome a sense of paralysis in my thought processes as I have tried to complete the work. Practical pressures have accompanied the need to contain the psychosocial aspects of the work. I have sought out checklists to help me through these processes, at times feeling ashamed of the decisions I have made, frustrated at the barriers I have encountered and worried that I have got things badly wrong. It has sometimes, for example, been easier to 'do' according to the perceived expectations of others rather than critically engaging in thinking about what I am doing and why. It is possible to lose sight of the validity and potential contribution research can make to the discipline and profession. It has seemed to me there were parallels with the uncertainties social workers experience in relation to presenting evidence to a child protection conference or family court when arguing for the need to protect a child. As Munro (2011) notes, such uncertainties are an important part of professional humility and openness to new ideas and analysis. However, practitioners must be able to move beyond this into reasoned argument and defensible decision-making in order to safeguard vulnerable children. Just as social workers draw on reflective supervision to enable them to reconstruct their affective and subjective responses into emotionally thoughtful considerations, I, too, needed the reflective spaces of my journal, the analysis panels, and supervision to begin to recognize and accept the new knowledge and understanding produced through this research. Here it can be seen that the psychosocial approach informed not just the interview process and analysis, but also my own researcher journey.

An intention of this research was to show how individual subjectivity lends itself to work with emotional abuse. My analysis indicated that, even within a small sample of social workers, identity is hybrid and takes a number of forms, going beyond simple notions of difference such as gender or level of experience. Identity is complex, fluid and open to reinterpretation. We all belong to not one but at least several communities and 'possess multiplex subjectivity' (Narayan 1993: 676).

Consequently, there does not appear to be one single aspect of an individual's identity that directs the nature of the interactions that social workers have with other people, and how they utilise supportive aspects of their work such as supervision or

evidence informed practice. When working with a concept such as emotional abuse which is difficult to 'pin down', it is important to remain aware of the contributing factors that may influence assessment and decision-making. Use of a psychosocial approach to data collection and analysis in this research has assisted in illuminating the interactions and collisions between the various private and public worlds that influence social work practice.

## THE ROLE AND PLACE OF EMOTION IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

As demonstrated by the research, relationships in child protection work can be complex and fraught with layers of emotional tension. The intense but often unacknowledged psychological processes at play mean that practitioner/service-user relationships transcend the simple deliverance/reception of a service. While many of the social workers expertly presented their stories with a calm 'professional' demeanour, the psychosocial approach was helpful in identifying anxieties that were not overt in their narratives, but manifested below the surface. Some social workers seemed to walk an 'internal tightrope' (Grant 2014a: 346) when they worked with families. The level of anxiety social workers experience in order to appear to be good, reflective practitioners was apparent at all levels of social work practice, from the students on the analysis panel through to the more experienced practitioners. The research highlighted concerns about what happens when strong feelings are repressed or avoided.

Emotion was demonstrated in multiple ways during the research. It did not just have an impact on the work with emotional abuse, but often constituted an essential part of the work. Without reflective space, social workers can become overwhelmed and experience high levels of 'empathetic distress' (Kinman and Grant 2011: 271). Use of psychosocial methods has allowed for an exploration of the presence of social worker's reasonable and conscious distress in response to challenging situations. Analysis of the research panel's comments indicated that there is sometimes an assumption amongst social workers that their personal reactions to a situation must not be expressed. However, this can be a stressful experience and without the opportunity to discuss them, the emotional burden can be difficult to bear.

All of the social workers interviewed indicated a strong personal commitment to their jobs, routinely expressing their desire to work more effectively. Arguably, those who volunteered to participate in the research might be those most concerned with the nature of their practice, and therefore motivated to address the challenges of it. However, these committed workers all demonstrated the need for a supportive network and reflective opportunities to assist in containing the more anxiety provoking aspects of the work. The influence of emotion on the part of the social worker is implicit in the work but it is not necessarily addressed. This may be because it can seem messy, uncontrollable, time-consuming and frightening to attend to.

## BELONGING AND CONTAINMENT

A sense of belonging within an organisation also allows social workers to engage more effectively in making decisions about the extent to which children are at risk of emotional harm and other associated kinds of abuse. It also supports the social worker themselves in dealing with what can be the traumatic impact of having to do this, particularly early in their careers when they are new to the work.

### *One-to-one supervision and reflective practice*

The existing literature (e.g. Ruch 2007; Turner-Daly and Jack: 2014) highlights the importance of reflective social work supervision. In an institutional context, a supervisor should be able to function as a safe 'container' for their supervisees' more challenging emotional responses to the job. All of the participants, regardless of their level of social work experience or competence, demonstrated a need for a supportive mechanism to 'check out' their thoughts and feelings. The participants' predominant expectation was that their managers perform a monitoring role. This research reinforces existing literature, which suggests that much one-to-one supervision is taken up with the monitoring of bureaucratic tasks rather than the provision of a reflective space (Bogo 2006).

The working environment can provide little space to reflect, and social workers may begin to believe they are not entitled to support in managing their emotions or

aspects of their subjectivity that may be influencing their practice. A level of trust is required for a containing relationship between a supervisor and a supervisee to develop, and in some circumstances this trust does not exist, perhaps because of conflicting agendas or a mismatch of expectations. Social workers may, for example, feel their supervisor is prioritising more bureaucratic tasks, or will regard the expression of their distress as a weakness. However, a growing body of literature (e.g. Barlow with Scott 2010; Megele 2015; Ruch 2005a) indicates that leaving the exploration of practitioner emotions untouched may have far reaching consequences. There are implications for practice that arise from the sustained act of social workers separating off from their emotional responses (Cooper and Lousada 2005). This research strengthens and adds to the existing body of literature, as it gets up close to the experiences of social workers, demonstrating processes that can occur when adequate support is not provided. It indicates that consistent and effective provision of one-to-one supervision is not occurring as regularly as social workers would like or need.

During this research project, it was not possible in the given time and resources of the PhD funding period to explore the experiences of members of social work management, and the broader organisational context in relation to supervisory practice. I was only able, therefore, to listen to the reasons social workers, such as Tom, gave for this absence of support, and refer to other literature that is available on the subject.

This and other previous research suggests that it may be problematic for local authority managers to provide reflective supervision for practical reasons such as time limitations (Ruch 2007). Reasons that lie under the surface may include managers feeling emotionally under supported. This research indicates that processes such as defensive splitting commonly occur in both service-user and social worker responses when working under pressure. It is likely this occurs at every level of a social service organisation. For some managers, the idea of accessing their own uncomfortable emotions as well as their supervisees', whilst feeling ill equipped to contain them all, is akin to the fear of 'opening a can of worms'. It is simply too daunting a task to engage in. 'Professional resistance to acknowledging professional need, vulnerability and dependency' (Ruch 2007: 374) is an understandable avoidance reaction.

Managers require opportunities to reflect on the anxieties they have, and should have access to training which addresses how to provide reflective supervision: 'supportive systems that are psychosocially aware' (Ferguson in Ruch 2007) are required throughout an organisation. This is particularly important in practice with emotional abuse where the impact of the work may be particularly challenging. The defended responses inspired in professionals, at all levels of service provision, would benefit from further exploration and may illuminate the various reasons for why reflective supervision is not occurring, in spite of research consistently indicating that good practice demands it.

### *Peer support and organisational culture*

The notion of relationships is considered throughout the thesis, starting from the relationship between a parent and a child in the literature review chapter, and ending with the social workers, their relationships with one another and their supervisors in chapter six. Much child protection research focuses on the importance of the need for a team around the child: for the quality of the child's relationships to be addressed. In order for social workers to help develop this supportive and communicative network for the child, they too may do better with a well-functioning team around them. A network of support offers opportunities to share knowledge and perspectives. It can enable social workers to discuss the emerging difficulties of their work and contributes to building skills and developing self-efficacy.

When considering 'what works' when dealing with cases of emotional abuse, the social work literature points to relationship-based practice. In social worker and service-user relationships, the cultivation of interpersonal bonds produces effective working alliances, which in turn leads to more satisfactory outcomes (Barlow with Scott 2010; Knei-Paz 2009). However there may be ambivalence amongst professionals towards making space for engaging in relationship-based practice; they may have 'cynically abandoned' (Cooper 2012: 2) it. Their reasons for this ambivalence may be in part a cultural issue, as demonstrated in chapter six, of differing perceptions of the supportive nature of the working environment. The extent to which an organisation endorses the acknowledgment of the impact of

difficult emotions on practice and encourages the use of reflective space is a key factor. More 'positive' organisational culture (Thompson et al 1996) amongst social workers and their managers has to be cultivated.

This research indicates that peer support is an important relational aspect of social work practice. Provision of space for good practice is necessary. As highlighted by Bradley and Hojer's (2009) research, peer support groups which are externally facilitated have the advantage of providing spaces for groups of social workers to discuss the impact of their work and issues they are having with their cases, away from the procedure focused one-to-one supervision. Swedish social workers (Bradley and Hojer 2009) demonstrated a clear attachment to the support, and stated their 'right', no less, to it.

Proximity to team-members, and having a predictable physical team arrangement has an impact on social workers' sense of belonging within an organisation. Sitting close to each other and providing a listening ear may contribute to a sense of team. A sense of security and belonging offers opportunities for supportive conversations about work with emotional abuse. This can build morale, enable a sense of containment and improve people's capacity to problem solve. Self-efficacy and resilience may be directly influenced by the 'geography' of the workplace.

Isolation and nomadic working in social work is of major concern to the profession, particularly as co-working has been identified in social work research as a rare occurrence, but one that practitioners feel benefits their practice (Ruch 2013). They must also have spaces where they can safely address the anxieties and uncertainties they face in their practice (Ruch 2007: 664). The research has highlighted that in an office space where the role of emotional labour is crucial, the way in which an organisation promotes and maintains a sense of community is an important consideration. This is of particular importance when making apparently superficial changes to the way in which people work, such as a move to hot-desking set-up, that has a potentially 'de-socialising' effect (Hirst 2011: 781).

Reflection and reduced defences in the workplace could be regarded as aspects of a positive working culture. However, achieving positive culture requires a commitment to change at all levels of an organisation. 'Changing a negative or destructive culture is a major undertaking' (Thompson et al 1996: 664), which first

requires organisations to become better attuned to the needs of their social workers. Social workers require the provision of supportive structure to be maintained and adapted according to their needs. Individual social workers also have the capacity and willingness to engage in reflective practice.

## COMBINING WAYS OF WORKING

According to this research, being a social worker requires addressing some key issues. In relations to social worker subjectivity, who we are and what we bring to the assessment process is relevant, and should not be ignored. Becoming a statutory child protection social worker requires the individual to absorb the notion of being a corporate parent into their subjectivity. It is as essential to their professional identity as is following policies, procedures, laws and engaging in evidence informed practice. Social workers need not only to be able to make sense of the relationships of others but they must also reflect critically on the relationships they have with families, children and other professionals. This can carry with it an immense amount of fear and anxiety about 'getting it right'. For example, inadvertently engaging in oppressive practices taps into major concerns about accountability. Un-bottling undesirable emotions is something social workers, and managers alike feel they do not have the time or space to accommodate.

However, social workers cannot rely on 'a feeling' that a child is unsafe in their family home any more than they can just consult a neat checklist of identifiers of emotional abuse and expect to eliminate the risks of it. Instead, they must draw on their knowledge and critical reasoning skills to analyse the information available to them in order to understand the 'complexity, uncertainty and risk in practice' (Parton 1998; Ruch 2005). Social workers should make use of both 'practical–moral' sources of knowledge, drawing on qualities of self-awareness and an aptitude for empathy to guide practice, and also 'technical–rational' sources of knowledge, which include information derived from professional experience and studies of law and policy (Ruch 2005). These sources of knowledge contribute to capacity for reflective practice and 'making sense' of the complex nature of social work practice with children and families through critical thinking and learning.

Informal assessments that a social work intervention is needed are often based on initial subjective responses to nebulous cases of emotional harm that a social worker experiences as intuitively worrying. This research illustrates how logical approaches to work may be used to 'shore up' decisions about how to address an abusive family dynamic. The way in which a social worker combines the skills they have during their engagement with a particular situation is key to providing well thought out social work interventions that are confidently accounted for.

## CHAPTER CONCLUSION

The research has found that subjective experiences are often a starting place for many social workers in their everyday tasks when working with emotional abuse. Innermost feelings about a harmful situation are not always expressed, even though emotional responses may be used to guide decision-making. The acknowledgment of one's difficult emotions in relation to this may be regarded as unprofessional or shameful. The research indicates that opportunities to processes and successfully contain feelings may assist in making space for more effective assessment of emotional abuse. The culture of the workplace has to change so that the provision of mechanisms such as reflective supervision and peer support are integral to practice and are not regarded as a time-consuming task, which takes them away from direct practice. This chapter validates the contribution to knowledge this research makes to working with emotional abuse from the multiple subjective perspectives of being an effective social worker.



## CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

### INTRODUCTION

This thesis has raised and investigated key themes in relation to work with emotional abuse. It has provided a conceptual map of how individual social workers approach work with intra-familial emotional abuse, highlighting particular ways of working which influence assessment and decision-making. This research offers direction for how various approaches may be integrated and developed in order to address concerns about emotional abuse more effectively. Through exemplifying specific practice experiences, a 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) of everyday encounters of work with emotional abuse has emerged. This final chapter begins by summarising what the research has uncovered, and it continues by suggesting next steps for future training, practice and research in more effective work with emotional abuse. The chapter ends with a consideration of the value of using psychosocial methods in the workplace to make sense of social workers' empirical experiences.

### FINDINGS

This research was initiated because emotional abuse has previously been identified in the literature as challenging to name and intervene with. This mirrored my own practice experiences, and I set out with the goal of shining some light on the nature of the complexity and uncertainty involved in the work. It was the research hypothesis that greater insight into social workers' experiences of day-to-day work with children and families may facilitate more effective practice. The research set out with the premise that emotional abuse should not be viewed simply as a concept constructed by modern society (Houston 2001), but as a real and serious form of abuse.

A psychosocial approach, using critical realism as an anchor, has supported the analysis of social worker's narratives of assessing emotional abuse in their everyday work. The reflexive agent (Archer 2007) as a multifaceted being has offered an insight into the range of ways social workers respond to emotional abuse.

It has demonstrated how child protection social workers address emotional abuse at its roots; finding ways of working with the harm that parental behaviours can cause to a developing child.

The data in this research shows that social workers take varying approaches to their work, with their individual subjectivity playing a role in how they designate a situation as emotionally harmful. It illustrates the ways in which subjective responses to challenging situations may impact on child protection work with emotional abuse. Bringing these responses to the surface for scrutiny can lead to defences becoming raised by interviewees, researchers and panel members alike. Hiding these kinds of subjective responses, particularly those that invite disapproval, may be a common and natural response. However, this research suggests that such reactions should be reflected upon and critically considered in safe spaces in order for work to be carried out more effectively. This research asks social workers to be less reliant on standardised checklists, which in the case of emotional abuse are often insufficient. It suggests social workers invest more energy in developing their professional assessments, which draw on guidelines, but do not define them.

Such an approach can increase levels of anxiety, particularly amongst newly qualified workers. The analysis of interviews with social workers explores their need for access to training opportunities, which will enhance their ability to identify and evidence the presence of harmful relationships through use of means such as psychodynamic processes and attachment theory. Social workers who lack self-efficacy or fear derision from the public and other professionals require space to explore how they might lower their defenses and apply appropriate theory, law and policy. They also require the opportunity to reflect upon their own, and their colleagues' strengths and weaknesses so that they may develop a style of working, both individually and as a team, that responds effectively to the challenges of working with emotional abuse. This research indicates that supportive mechanisms, such as the provision of reflective space, sustained peer support and a secure workplace environment can assist in improved levels of self-efficacy. This in turn enables better communication and stronger interpersonal relationships which support social workers in carrying out holistic assessments, and in delivering clear and assertive explanations about the presence of emotional harm.

The current literature suggests intuitive responses are not without validity. This study demonstrates how apparently inexplicable feelings of anxiety often alert social workers to carry out further investigations. A worry that there is 'something wrong' may later be corroborated by more concrete information that a relationship is harmful. However, the emergence of subjective concerns in relation to emotional abuse may be regarded as uncontained and unprocessed. From the perspective of professionals representing 'black letter law', expressions of intuition may be deemed as inappropriate, and easily dismissed as irrational or reactionary. This can ultimately lead to the discrediting of social workers. The psychosocial approach taken in this study has indicated how this affects social workers' perception of their own ability to the job, and it is damaging to the reputation of social workers as competent professionals in the public domain.

The research participants demonstrated clear individual strengths in their work, notably their commitment to addressing the needs of children at risk of emotional harm. However, social workers struggled to reconcile their weaknesses when they did not have the resources to address their flaws effectively. For example, less formal approaches to work with emotional abuse which rely on 'instinct' may be dismissed or remain unexplored. Such intuitive judgments may be regarded as lacking in legitimacy, without any real basis and possibly based on one person's subjectively informed preconceptions. Not being able to articulate or substantiate concerns about a case, followed by one's judgment being diminished or minimised, can be detrimental to professional self-efficacy. This self-doubt can impact negatively on practice. Sometimes social workers in this research simply wanted the opportunity to know that they were not alone in experiencing the work as challenging. There was some reassurance, as Theresa in the FST focus group said, in the knowledge that: *'...we're all having the same struggles.'*

## AREAS FOR FUTURE TRAINING, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

Based on the findings, three broad areas for future training practice and research are outlined here. It is the **first recommendation** of this research that social workers are provided with greater support and training opportunities to increase skills and self-efficacy in work with emotional abuse. This falls into the following

four key areas, which emerged from the literature review and were linked to the research data;

- a) formalised knowledge about attachment theory;
- b) developed awareness of psychodynamic processes, such as transference, splitting and projection;
- c) enhanced understanding about the impact of adverse environments on a child's welfare, for example accessing up to date research; and
- d) the use of psychosocial theory as a tool to support reflection.

Comprehensive training in the application of attachment theory may enable social workers to develop skills and knowledge that enhances their intuitive skills. The use of attachment theory requires particular attention from the profession, so that social workers can refer to it in formal contexts with greater confidence. Standardised training in the assessment of attachment patterns is available (Crittenden and Claussen 2000; Lee et al. 2011), but it is a lengthy and complex process, which involves learning to reliably code relationships for attachment patterns, and consequently takes some time to complete. With a clear theorisation of the nature of a harmful situation, a social worker is better equipped to clearly articulate their concerns. However, the most important aspect of social workers' understanding of the application of attachment theory is the recognition and articulation of the kinds of relationships that social workers not only observe in others, but also those that they detect in their own relationships.

Attachment training does not eliminate the presence of subjectivity. In its application, aspects of a social worker's subjectivity, such as their own attachment history for example, may influence how they designate a particular attachment style to a child (Crittenden and Claussen 2000). Social workers must therefore be able to critique the extent to which their work is informed by their own experiences. An awareness of one's own attachment style within the context of an assessment is crucial to effective work with emotional abuse, as is a capacity to reflect on one's own subjective contribution to situations. An awareness of the possible attachment theory related reasons for why a particular response might emerge in any given situation offers the opportunity of a tangible, psychological chronology for an individual. A present emotional state or style of relating to others may be traced back to its original templates. These blueprints may potentially be made more

perceptible, understood, reconciled and adapted to produce less toxic and destructive ways of reacting to stress and anxiety in the future.

Being able to gain an insight into the psychodynamic processes at play can assist social workers in articulating their own awareness of intangible aspects of emotional abuse. Understanding one's own inner world, for example, what motivates us, what causes our defences to rise, and how we interact with others, can enhance personal capacity to identify emotional abuse and to communicate these concerns more effectively. It can assist in accessing and showing empathetic feelings towards parents. This kind of self-awareness is a quality that social workers require of parents when they encourage them to attune to their child and mentalize.

Awareness of, and access to, resources such as up to date research about advances in neurobiological theory are important so that social workers are well informed and can support their interventions with appropriate information. Litigious routes to child protection measures in cases of emotional abuse are not always appropriate when thresholds of harm are disputable and cumulative evidence takes a long time to build. Therefore, most interventions with emotional abuse occur outside the legal arena. Direct interventions during engagement with families may occur more quickly and effectively where respectful and communicative relationships exist. Enhanced interpersonal skills assist social workers to perform less intrusive and disruptive interventions, bringing practice with emotional abuse closer to the aspiration of encouraging sensitive and attuned parenting in every day social work contact (Barlow and Schrader-McMillan 2010).

However, in many cases there is animosity towards social workers, which may impact upon the willingness of parent and social worker alike to work towards change. This can be anxiety provoking and stressful for all concerned. If a social worker has held a case for a long period of time, they need to maintain commitment, stay resilient, and where necessary acknowledge when their intervention methods are not being effective. This can be a demanding process. All social workers, regardless of their level of experience and their practice approach, require support in acknowledging and reflecting upon the ways in which their subjectivity influences their approaches to work with emotional abuse. Being able to explore and make

sense of what is going on under the surface of one's own defended responses is an important aspect of every day work.

Although emotions are experienced individually, when a group comes together to work on a shared task, emotional issues come to belong to the 'group as a whole' (Brisset and Sher 2010: 70). During the focus groups I was able to observe the nature of the relationships social workers had formed and the ways in which they used each other as sources of support and information. Both groups chose to explore some of the anxieties they associated with work concerning emotional abuse. As group members expressed their positive feelings about being able to discuss their worries, the process of sharing experiences and skills allowed some of their anxieties to be reduced.

This research found that through the creation of space to talk openly and confidently about these factors, work with challenging aspects of casework can be supported. It also allows for an accessible discourse amongst social workers about emotions and psychodynamic processes to become more commonplace. Multiple perspectives and suggestions of alternative resources or approaches may support not only decision-making during the intervention and reviewing processes, but also encourage a sense of camaraderie amongst social workers.

Promotion of peer support, with particular attention to the physical layout of the workplace, which supports the building of interpersonal relationships, is highlighted in this research. A secure working environment that promotes connections between individuals and the wider team may enable social workers to address the impact on them of working with emotional abuse. Although essential to social work practice, this is not necessarily available. A sense of belonging in an organisation is, at times, undermined by a workplace that is insecure. Organisational structures, however well meaning, may serve as barriers or may be inadequately resourced, precluding managers and co-workers from functioning as effective emotional containers for one another. The research endorses the existing literature that suggests that social workers who are offered opportunities to access peer support may be better placed to engage in effective work with emotional abuse. Regular opportunities for social workers to strengthen social support network, is 'one of the most effective buffers against stress (Sarason et al. in Grant and Kinman 2012:612). It is, therefore, the

**second recommendation** of this research that social workers have regular opportunities to engage in facilitated peer-support groups and have an office set up which facilitates supportive teamwork.

The assessment of emotional abuse often provokes feelings of uncertainty in the social worker the case is assigned to. In these situations it may be regarded as an appropriate professional response to give a performance of competence. This may rely on a range of defence strategies, such as a disproportionate focus on completing paperwork and bureaucratic tasks. Social workers may 'arm' themselves with hard evidence and an authoritative stance. However, without the space to explore the uncertainties the work inevitably brings, these ways of working may have the secondary, undesirable effect of discounting or overlooking harm that is not clearly defined at the outset. Uncomfortable emotional reactions to distressing cases can take time and energy to work through, particularly when a social worker is new to the work. However, suppression of these feelings in the long term can be far more detrimental to effective work with emotional abuse. The reflexive mechanisms employed during this research, such as making use of regular supervision and free writing, demonstrate the effectiveness with which defences may be detected and worked with to support one's own and other's awareness of them. In turn these defences may be analysed for their origins, with the intention of delivering more effective ways of working. The research, for example allowed me to detect the way in which social workers such as Fiona and myself, might become 'stuck' on their emotional reactions to a distressing situation, and could benefit from sharing them with a trusted other and perhaps integrating more evidence informed approaches, such as those employed by Tom. A case for proving the significant harm of emotional abuse might be more effectively presented to other professionals where there is a balance of understanding one's own countertransference and supplementing it with appropriate and up to date knowledge.

Reflective opportunities provided by supervisors are key to achieving social worker self-efficacy in their everyday duties. Empathetic relationships at all levels of a service are required to promote a positive working environment. The **third recommendation** of this research is that social workers receive regular one-to-one supervision, which is not related to bureaucratic accountability, but that supports

engagement in emotionally aware, reflective practice. Although this is already an expectation of managerial supervision, this research demonstrated empirically that it does not necessarily occur. Social workers consequently have low expectations of receiving reflective supervision, or even a familiar and trusted colleague to talk to. Being a professional social worker can be uncertain and precarious, which is not an acceptable starting point for carrying out child protection work, which already carries these risk factors. It is therefore an on-going priority that reflective and supportive practice is promoted in everyday work and is whole-heartedly integrated into the culture of every statutory child protection workplace. Barriers that are presented to effective managerial supervision are an area that needs closer research attention. Where supervision is purely bureaucratic and reflective practice is a perfunctory provision, further psychosocial investigation is required for deeper understanding.

Therefore, attached to this third recommendation is the proposition of further research that explores the managerial difficulties associated with the delivery of such a provision. It is proposed that research be carried out with managers, which seeks to exemplify how they offer reflective supervision to social workers, and what mechanisms support them in doing this. This could be achieved through interviews with managers and observations of supervisory practice.

## REFLECTIONS ON THE METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The use of psychosocial methods to gather and analyse the data have illuminated the necessity for an evolving and unending dialogue about practice with emotional abuse, and in particular the use of psychosocial methods at the practice level. A drawback of such an in-depth qualitative approach is that it can promote a continual cycle of reflexivity. Incorporating an analysis panel made up of social work students, who were close to graduation, brought an additional layer of anxieties to the data about work with emotional abuse. These worries seemed to focus largely on the need to perform professional accountability. Like the interview participants, the subjective contributions of the panel members also required interrogation.

A questioning, psychosocial method can promote uncertainty. Therefore, in some ways, this exploration has led to more questions about the how social workers



engage with emotional abuse than it has settled. However, as shown here, uncertainty along with risk is inherent in child protection work (Munro 2011). A sense of continuing uncertainty does not often feel satisfactory, but it is a prominent feature of social work practice. Social workers must know that uncertainty cannot be eradicated, and be willing to listen to alternative explanations when they are offered. In successfully processing unpleasant 'gut feelings' (Munro 2011: 91), they may tolerate their anxieties about their judgments and incorporate different approaches to their work, moving towards a tangible and holistic expression of the reasons for their concerns. In a similar way a psychosocial researcher may support the management of their own anxieties through the use of a reflective journal, panels and supervision for reflexivity.

My proficiency as a researcher using psychosocial processes has developed over the course of carrying out the PhD. It is possible that I have only scratched the surface in the interviews regarding such processes. Using a psychosocial approach has required me to be very visible in the research; more so than I had anticipated at the start. I have used my own emotional responses to the research process to guide analysis of the data and to show sensitivity to the participants, aiming to carry out the interviews and analysis with respectful interest.

My increased knowledge of psychological behaviours such as counter-transference, projection and splitting have already enabled me to improve my own every day teaching and training practices. When I am supervising undergraduate students, or discussing social workers' practice following observation of their work, a thorough grounding in the use of a psychosocial approach has allowed me to continue to exercise and build on my skills. Assisting students and social workers towards understanding their personal involvement in a particular situation can support the development of their reflective capacity. Enabling them to acknowledge their own subjectivity, rather than move away from it, provides the opportunity for them to continue their everyday tasks with greater self-knowledge.

Use of psychosocial methods has developed my own reflexive capacity and therefore strengthened my research skills. I observe my own anxious or defended reactions to another person's way of working, or to a case that reminds me of one I may have held in the past. I allow myself to see my reactions and pay them some attention, rather than hurrying over them if they feel uncomfortable or inappropriate.

The psychosocial approach has supported the representation of everyone who took part in the research process as three-dimensional human beings with multifaceted subjectivity and a range of complex emotional responses. The use of an overarching critical realist framework has assisted in the development of a practice model for work with emotional abuse. A social worker's empirical experiences influence their various interactions with other people and structural instruments, such as the law. The ways in which their subjectivity is incorporated during engagement with their surroundings and the supportive measures available to them contributes to the effectiveness of their work with intrafamilial emotional abuse.

### *The effectiveness of the research methods*

Information has emerged from the data in different ways than was anticipated. It was speculated that responses to questions about working with emotional abuse would emerge from interviews and focus groups, and would vary according to whether social workers were situated in DATs or FSTs. It was indeed the case that DAT social workers did, in some ways, offer greater insight into their initial assessment of cases. They spoke with greater attention to the law in relation to thresholds for concern, and the identification of emotional abuse. FST workers tended to elaborate more on the subjective experience of 'holding' a case over a longer period of time, and on the nature of building and sustaining relationships with families. However, notions of 'relationship building' were not confined to discussions with FST members, as relationships may be quickly built at first contact.

In planning to carry out two-part individual interviews I was concerned about the capacity of busy social workers to commit to this arrangement. However, the social workers who agreed to take part were able, apart from one exception, to make the time to follow up with the second part of the interview. From a research perspective, the two-part interview was a useful process. The 'newness' of the relationship with participants in the first interview meant that it did not always seem appropriate to ask certain questions about subjective factors in participants' personal lives, such as their own familial relationships. Time after the first interview allowed me to consider and raise questions to follow up with in the second. Around half of the participants said they read some, or all, of the transcript in between the interviews.

The majority commented that reading back their own words made them feel uncomfortable, as well as creating a pressure on their time.

I have dissected the practice of social workers in this study and held it under a magnifying glass. The analysis does not always offer a flattering picture of their work. However, the participants who volunteered to take part in the research are social workers who go 'above and beyond' in their everyday practice. They gave their informed consent to take part in the research, with the knowledge that their work would be scrutinised and critiqued. They used their own time and drew on their personal reserves to reflect on their more challenging aspects of their work, which they may have experienced at times as exposing and demanding. They shared their insights into the complexities of work with emotional abuse, and risked appearing vulnerable or uncertain of themselves; motivated by the aspiration that a greater focus on training and practice may follow from their contributions to the research. It is important to acknowledge that the ethics of interpretation in psychosocial research is an involving task for the researcher. I reflected on the reflections of the participants as they interacted (Hollway and Jefferson 2013), trying to ensure, as far as possible, that the participants were involved in the 'construction of interpretation' (155).

The small sample of participants in this research means that the findings are not a universal representation of practice. Although this research has focused on interviews with social workers, families and children's experiences of emotional abuse have been 'held in mind' throughout. The research was carried out amongst a fairly homogeneous population of social workers where the ethnicity of both practitioners and service users was predominantly white British and this may account for why race, ethnicity and culture were less prominent aspects of it. In future plans for a larger scale research study, I would seek to construct an interview schedule that encompasses a more diverse range of the population. This might be achieved by interviewing social workers from local authorities across different areas of the country, for example in cities with a stronger ethnically diverse presence.

## THE VALUE OF CARRYING OUT RESEARCH IN THE WORKPLACE

The research environment of the one-to-one interview served a small but formative function. It gave the participants an hour, if they so wished, to process difficult issues related to specific cases, and to confidentially process some of the emotions provoked through working with them. They often brought emotional abuse cases to discuss that 'niggled' them, which they felt unsatisfied or uneasy about in relation to how they had worked with it. During the interviews they were able to take advantage of the space available, knowing they could take the time to unpick why the case had been problematic, and perhaps gain a degree of resolution or learning.

For busy child protection social workers, it is often the case that taking part in research and engaging in learning opportunities are not a priority, and is something of a luxury. It may be that many practitioners are unable to participate because they feel overburdened with the routine tasks of their role. Promoting learning and research in workplace is an aspect of developing positive aspects of culture (Munro and Hubbard 2011) that has to occur at all levels of an organisational structure in order for it to thrive. Although the overall aim of carrying out the research has been to add to current knowledge about work with emotional abuse in order to inform and improve social work practice, in its course the research has also highlighted the benefits of close alliances between social work research, education and practice.

An outcome of carrying out this research has been the opening up of an on-going dialogue between myself, social workers and legal professionals who require support and insight into the complexities of working with the cases of emotional abuse they encounter in a legal context. In response to the issues raised during the research process about the anxieties associated with presenting evidence of emotional abuse, an ESRC funded impact and collaboration workshop with social workers from a local authority was initiated. The session was an opportunity to share the research, reflect upon work with the law and develop collaborative relationships. The time spent researching this area has enabled me to recommend resources and relevant literature to social work, and initiate dialogue about more effective work with the law.

## ETHICAL AND DEFENSIBLE?

Child protection work requires a large personal investment. Social work professionals are often designated by society as agents responsible for safeguarding the welfare of vulnerable children, which can be a heavy burden to carry, in part because even the 'best' practice cannot predict and put an end to abuse. The subject matter of interviews was routinely sensitive, and sometimes brought up distressing memories and feelings for the participants that had not been previously acknowledged.

In the context of reflecting on the ethical 'spirit' of the research, I feel some ambivalence about the quite confessional nature of using psychosocial methods, in part because it can leave people with the uncomfortable feeling of having 'said too much'. Psychosocial methods may be experienced as intrusive if interviewing and analysis processes are not handled sensitively. I imagined that if a social worker took part in the research then read this thesis they might feel angry, misrepresented and ashamed by the scrutiny of their practice. It is of course possible that they would not recognise themselves in the analysis or offer other plausible explanations for their contributions. On the other hand, it is possible that they may feel some pride in having shared the more difficult aspects of their work in order to improve understandings about the emotionally demanding and complex nature of their jobs.

I have given a significant part of my own time and personal resources to completing this work. It has enhanced the understanding I bring to social work practice and allowed me to work towards providing a more balanced model with which to respond to emotional abuse in a statutory child protection setting. I still remain uncertain around work with emotional abuse, but use my uncertainty to deepen my understanding, working with others to encourage effective use of subjectivity. The acknowledgement of social workers' uncertainties and flaws is often met by discomfort when I present the findings of this research. However, I impart the knowledge I have acquired, where possible, in order to continue the evolution of insight into it. I do so with a sense of professional self-efficacy that goes beyond the limitations of material resources and helps to plot a map for students and practitioners to assist in lowering their defenses. By acknowledging their own uncertainties, polarised responses to challenging situations may be gradually

reduced, and a more sophisticated understanding to work with abuse, that goes beyond the need for concrete and visible evidence, may be brought.

## IN CONCLUSION

This in-depth exploration of social workers' subjective responses to work with emotional abuse offers an insight into the challenges they experience on a day to day basis, and the kinds of supportive measures they need to work more effectively. Through psychosocial methods this research has illuminated the challenges associated with practice where emotional abuse is a concern. Individual social workers' narratives have been used as a starting point for seeking insight into these challenges. Their experiences have demonstrated how they use their subjectivity to bring tangibility to unseen harm. Interrogating subjective responses to work with emotional abuse has contributed evidence to a growing body of research that indicates practice with emotional abuse in the future must emphasise the importance of ensuring social workers are reflective, well-informed, resilient individuals who can support one another effectively, sharing experiences and resources.

The insights that have been imparted by social workers in this research will be disseminated in a series of articles, and it is a hope that further discussions about how to pre-empt and intervene with emotional abuse will be provoked by the contribution this research makes to the current field of knowledge. It is anticipated that the research may also be of broader relevance to academics, educators and practitioners with an interest in in-depth understandings of social work practice with emotional abuse.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1: PAGE 1 OF LITERATURE REVIEW SEARCH TERMS LOG

Date	Journal /Source	Keywords	No of results	Exclude /include reasons	Article range - Brief Description/Notes
23/05/13	EJSW	Emotional abuse + Child Protection	86 57		Predom Quant. Questionnaires, numerical analysis. Impact on SW practice of personal exp of DV. Question asked to elicit responses. SW less able to hold mother response if father is perpetrator. limitations on professional's capacity. Importance of supervision.
19/07/13	ASSIA (criteria: peer reviewed, English after 1980)	Emotional abuse child protection Emotional+abuse child+protection	47 12	Added + to narrow search. adult care	Ayre – similar article from sw journal
26/07/13	SCOPOUS (after 1980)	Emotional abuse child protection "emotional abuse" AND "child protection"	224 48		Scopus/Assia – same results – Ayre, Doyle, Chamberland Already have O'Hagan, Shull – to re-read UNABLE TO locate :Rees – understanding emotional abuse - archives of disease of childhood – paediatrics Also Thomson and Kaplan – medical
07/08/13	Journal of EA	'child protection' No option of date – but all after 1980	42	Relevance e.g. trauma in trans gender pop'n	More in-depth about processes of emotional abuse – so selected 6 on basis of relevance and interest eg. Focus on parenting, lack of empathy

## APPENDIX 2: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET



### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

**Study title :** What are the challenges that assessing and working with 'emotional abuse' in families present to social workers in England?

You are invited to take part in a research study. Before deciding whether to take part, it is important to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

#### **What is the purpose of the study?**

This research investigates the challenges that assessing and working with 'emotional abuse' in families present to child protection social workers in England. Previous research demonstrates that social workers struggle with recognising, naming and intervening in cases where emotional abuse is or may be present. Better understanding of subjective experiences of assessing and intervening with emotional abuse will contribute to what is known about how it is defined and worked with. The aim is to inform the support, supervision and training offered to social workers.

This qualitative project uses a three phase design to gain in depth knowledge of the topic. The first phase consists of a focus group of up to 8 social workers who will be asked to discuss how they define, construct and work with EA, using anonymised examples from practice. The second and third phases are two individual, in depth interviews which will explore how social workers come to construct parental behaviour or a child's experiences as EA, and how they then work with such a situation. While the first set of interviews will focus on direct experiences from practice, the second will provide an opportunity for participants to deeply reflect on the themes that have emerged through the initial researcher analysis and their own internal processing of the experience.

#### **Why have I been invited to participate?**

You have been invited to participate because you are a child protection social worker in the local authority I have been given permission to approach to take part. Your experiences are a valuable source of information, which will inform important research about the way work concerning emotional abuse is carried out. It may contribute to

knowledge about how social workers may be better supported in this complex and demanding role.

### **Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and asked to sign a consent form. You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason up until submission of the thesis.

### **What is involved in taking part?**

If you take part in a focus group and are interested in participating in interviews, you may be asked to attend two hour long one-to-one sessions, which will take place at intervals of 4-6 weeks. You can take part in interviews if you have not attended a focus group. However, as the interviews follow a two-part structure you need be available for them both. Interviews will be arranged to fit in with your schedule and can take place in a meeting room at your offices, at Sussex University or in your own home; whichever location you prefer.

The research method has a 'psychosocial' approach. It is a reflective way of carrying out interviews. You will be asked 'open' questions to discuss different aspects of the job, including your thoughts and feelings. The psychosocial process tries to look 'under the surface' and find out more about how, for example, your previous experiences, views and cultural background contribute to decision-making processes. In the first interview we will talk about your cases, and if they contain EA. Ahead of the second interview the first interview will be transcribed and sent to you. During the second interview we will discuss in more depth some aspects of your work which are of interest and reflect on information shared in the first interview.

### **What are the possible benefits and disadvantages of taking part?**

You may enjoy taking part and learn more about the way you work with families and children where emotional abuse is or may be a concern. By participating you will increase understanding of EA, which may contribute to improved support for social workers. This may benefit both the profession and children and families for whom emotional abuse may exist.

The focus group and interviews may collectively use several hours of your time. The research process may cause you think in greater depth about cases you work with. You might think about troubling cases, and your responses to them, which may possibly be distressing or tiring. You may find that after a group or an interview has finished, what was discussed may still be on your mind. However, you only have to talk about what you feel comfortable with and you are free to withdraw without explanation at any time. As a researcher who is also a social worker, the wellbeing of participants is my priority. I will not press you to answer questions if you do not want this or it does not seem appropriate to do so.

**Will information I share be kept confidential?**

Information collected will be kept strictly confidential (subject to legal limitations). It will be anonymised before analysis. Confidentiality, privacy and anonymity will be ensured in collection, storage and publication of research material. Focus group participants will be asked to respect the confidentiality of other participants. Pseudonyms will be used where possible during recorded conversations, and throughout transcriptions. All electronic material relating to interviews will be password protected. Documents such as consent forms and interview notes will be kept in a locked drawer. A condition of the research funding is that research data is shared and stored in a repository so others could re-analyse it in the future. Therefore, your anonymised data will be stored with the Economic and Social Data Service and be openly available.

**What will happen to the results of the research study?**

The results of the study will be used for my PhD thesis in Social Work, and may be published in an article in an academic journal. I may provide conference and professional seminars to help improve practice from my findings. I will be happy to discuss the results of my study with you when it is complete.

**Who is organising, funding and approving the research study?**

I am conducting the research as a student in the Social Work department at the University of Sussex. I am supervised by Dr Michelle Lefevre and Dr Tish Marrable. The Economic and Social Research Council is funding the research. It has been approved by the University of Sussex's Cross-Schools Research Ethics Committee (C-REC) through the School of Education and Social Work's ethical review process.

**Contact for Further Information :** My email address is [g.north@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:g.north@sussex.ac.uk)

Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet.

**Gemma North**

**Doctoral Researcher at University of Sussex**

APPENDIX 3: CONSENT FORM FOR PROJECT PARTICIPANTS –  
FOCUS GROUP



**CONSENT FORM FOR PROJECT PARTICIPANTS – FOCUS  
GROUP**

**PROJECT TITLE:** What are the challenges that assessing and working with  
'emotional abuse' in families present to social workers in  
England?

I agree to take part in the above University of Sussex research project. I have had the project explained to me and I have read and understood the Information Sheet, which I may keep for my records. I understand that agreeing to take part means that I am willing to:

- Attend a focus group facilitated by the researcher
- Allow the focus group to be audio taped

I understand that the nature of our discussions refer to confidential matters, and that I should ensure that no information that I disclose will lead to the identification of any individual in the reports on the project, either by the researcher or by any other party. I will not refer to any individuals or services by their real name.

I agree to respect the confidentiality of other participants during participation in the focus group.

I understand that if the researcher were to have any concerns about the wellbeing of the children and families in the cases I discuss or consider that instances of unprofessional or unethical behaviour have been discussed, these will be raised with me for clarification/action before being passed onto a member of my management team.

I understand that I can withdraw my consent for data shared by me to be included up until the submission of the thesis.

All of the following boxes must be ticked in order to take part in the research.

*Please tick if you consent*

I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I can choose not to participate in part or all of the project, and that I can withdraw at any stage of the project without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way.	
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*Please tick if you consent*

I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes of this research study. I understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.	
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This research project is funded by the Economic Social Research Council (ESRC) who require that the data collected must be made available for re-use for future research and analysis.

*Please tick if you consent*

I understand and agree that anonymised data will be stored electronically and made publically accessible for an indefinite period of time.	
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Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature:

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Date:

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## APPENDIX 4: CONSENT FORM FOR PROJECT PARTICIPANTS INTERVIEWS



### CONSENT FORM FOR PROJECT PARTICIPANTS – INTERVIEWS

**PROJECT TITLE:** What are the challenges that assessing and working with 'emotional abuse' in families present to social workers in England?

I agree to take part in the above University of Sussex research project. I have had the project explained to me and I have read and understood the Information Sheet, which I may keep for my records. I understand that agreeing to take part means that I am willing to:

- \* Be interviewed by the researcher
- \* Allow the interviews to be audio taped

I understand that the nature of our discussions refer to confidential matters, and that I should ensure that no information that I disclose will lead to the identification of any individual in the reports on the project, either by the researcher or by any other party. I will not refer to any individuals or services by their real name.

I understand that if the researcher were to have any concerns about the wellbeing of the children and families in the cases I discuss or consider that instances of unprofessional or unethical behaviour have been discussed, these will be raised with me for clarification/action before being passed onto a member of my management team.

I understand that I will be given a transcript of my interviews for my approval before this is included in the write up of the research. I understand that I can withdraw my consent for data shared by me to be included up until the submission of the thesis.

All of the following boxes must be ticked in order to take part in the research.

*Please tick if you consent*

I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I can choose not to participate in part or all of the project, and that I can withdraw at any stage of the project without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way.	
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*Please tick if you consent*

I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes of this research study. I understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.	
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This research project is funded by the Economic Social Research Council (ESRC) who require that the data collected must be made available for re-use for future research and analysis.

*Please tick if you consent*

I understand and agree that anonymised data will be stored electronically and made publically accessible for an indefinite period of time.	
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Name:

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Signature

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Date:

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## APPENDIX 5: CASE STUDY FOR FOCUS GROUPS

Eleven year old Kayley is doing well at school and her attendance is good, but she has told the school nurse she has felt very depressed for some time, and has threatened suicide four times and cut her wrists, but not severely. She told the nurse her mother Anna and her new boyfriend recently went on a weekend trip, taking his two children with them. They told Kayley that they did not want her to accompany them. She was told that they were ashamed of her and that she would have to ask one of the neighbours to take her in for the weekend.

## APPENDIX 6: TOPIC GUIDE

### Interviews

#### General info questions

- qualification held
- length of qualification
- team (duty/long term)
- position in team
- type of work undertaken

1. Can you tell me first about a situation you have worked with where emotional abuse was present.

Can you describe some of the characteristics of the child's presentation or parent/carer's behaviour that made it clear that it did constitute emotional abuse?

- How did you decide the threshold was reached that means it definitely should be seen as emotional abuse?
- What was the reasoning process you followed?
- What kind of reactions did you have to this situation and how did you manage them? (prompt for emotional and personal reactions to child and parent as well as to the decision-making process)
- Did you talk to colleagues/supervisor about how to work with the case or about your reactions to it? What were their responses? How did they help/hinder your thinking or emotional processing?
- Did your views about emotional abuse change at all as a result of working with this family?

2. Can you now tell me about a family you have worked with where it was harder to determine whether or not it might constitute emotional abuse?

- How did you decide whether the threshold for emotional abuse was or wasn't reached in this situation? Was the decision making process any different from the previous example? Easier/harder this time?
- What was the reasoning process you followed?
- Were you left uncertain about what to decide or how best to proceed?
- What about your personal reactions this time? Similar/different? Easier/harder to manage? Reasons for this?
- Did you talk to colleagues/supervisor this time about how to work with the case or about your reactions to it? What were their responses? How did they help/hinder your thinking or emotional processing?
- Did your views about emotional abuse change at all as a result of working with this family?

3. How do you decide how/what is the best way to intervene in emotional abuse cases such as these?

- Do you draw on any frameworks/models/theory/research findings to help you make this decision? Where did you learn about them? How about frameworks/models you may have learnt about during training or cpd?
- What role does your relationship with the parent/child play in intervening?
- Influence of supervisor/colleagues/peer supervision?
- How does the core group work in these situations..?
- What about relationships with other professionals...?
- 

4. If you could use 3 words to describe what it feels like to work with situations of actual or suspected emotional abuse like this, what would they be?

- Are there any approaches/support mechanisms you have that help you manage these feelings?
- Do you think your own personal relational and emotional history plays a part at all?